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# Afterschool Matters

OCCASIONAL PAPER SERIES

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An Exploration of Boys'  
Identity Formation  
through Digital Storytelling  
in an Afterschool Program

GLYNDA A. HULL, NORA L.  
KENNEY, STACY MARPLE, & ALI  
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# Many Versions of Masculine

## *An Exploration of Boys' Identity Formation through Digital Storytelling in an Afterschool Program*

Glynda A. Hull, Nora L. Kenney, Stacy Marple, & Ali Forsman-Schneider

### Executive Summary

Both scholarly literature and popular media often depict predominantly negative and one-dimensional images of boys, especially African-American boys. Predictions of these boys' anticipated difficulties in school and adulthood are equally prevalent. This paper reports qualitative research that features case studies of nine urban boys of color, aged nine to eleven, who participated in an afterschool program where they learned to create digital multimedia texts. Drawing on an analysis of the children's patterns of participation, their multimodal products, and their social and intellectual growth over time, the study revealed that these children demonstrated many versions of male selves, and that their digital stories narrated these identities in ways that often challenged hegemonic versions of masculinity. These enactments of identity were made possible by the ways that their afterschool social space structured their activities, as well as by the symbolic means and subject matters privileged in that space, principally digital multimodal narratives and popular culture. At a time when afterschool programs are under pressure to become extensions of the school day, this research argues for recognition of and support for the different functions such programs can serve when structured as alternative spaces for learning and identity formation.

The past decade has seen an explosion of scholarly and popular literature on boys and masculinity. The bulk of this literature has called attention to the difficulties that surround growing up male, while the remainder has debated and refined those analyses or offered ways to address what are thought to be the special difficulties that boys face in terms of identity formation (Connell, 1995, 1996; Lesko, 2000; Pollack, 1998). Interest in masculinity began in earnest with attempts to theorize the social construction of gender and to question its merely biological base (Whitehead, 2002).<sup>1</sup>

Inspired in part by feminist movements, researchers had earlier offered evidence that girls were being short-changed in schooling by low expectations and unequal opportunities (Millard, 1997). Similarly, and partly in reaction, researchers from many disciplines would go on to claim that boys, too, face a variety of gendered challenges: a feminine bias in schooling, curricular mismatches with their predilections, poor literacy performance, and in general the pressure to adopt "hegemonic" versions of masculinity (Newkirk, 2002; Rowan, Knobel, Bigum, &

Lankshear, 2002; Sommers, 2000). Black masculinity has had a significant literature of its own, which tries to characterize and explore the origins of enacting Black manhood, as well as to bring into focus the related ways in which African-American boys, by virtue simply of being Black, are at extreme risk of being poorly served in school (hooks, 2004a, 2004b; Ferguson, 2001; Murtadha-Watts, 2000; Noguera, 2003; Reese, 2004).

This paper also reports research about boys who, by most indicators, could not look forward to promising educational or economic futures. Our qualitative study features nine boys, aged nine to eleven, six of whom were African American, one East Indian and African American, one Mexican American, and another Cambodian. This ethnic and racial mix reflected the demographics of the urban center in which the boys lived. We came to know these boys through their participation in an afterschool program where they came to learn to create digital multimodal, multimedia texts—brief movies that included their narrated voice recordings, photographs and images, and background music. Our study of these boys' participation

No one would argue that children should not master traditional symbol systems of reading and writing. But increasingly, many claim that these systems might best be learned in connection with other modalities—especially in digital environments—and that the relative importance of modalities is shifting, as images and icons push words from the page and the screen.

and their digital products benefited from previous scholarship on masculinity and its intersection with literacy and schooling (Dutro, 2003; Millard, 1997; Newkirk, 2002; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Young & Brozo, 2001). We were alerted, for example, to what are viewed as boys' typical preferences in story topics in comparison to girls, and our field notes regularly recognized gendered patterns of social interaction. "Today was a day when all you can say is 'boys will be boys,'" noted one of the afterschool tutors. However, there were other ways, ones we think are important to describe, in which the boys' participation and creative work ran counter to expected patterns and perceived norms. A primary purpose of this article, then, is to delineate those differences: to demonstrate, for example, the many versions of a masculine self that were enacted by the boys in their digital stories and through their social interactions, in contrast to the more one-dimensional portraits that occur in some research and popular literature. To that end our principal case study will introduce a boy named Taj,<sup>2</sup> who defined himself not in the stereotypical masculine sense of being impervious to hurt or physically strong, but as a vulnerable superhero whose special power was the ability to fall apart.

A second purpose of this paper is to explore the boys' uses of multimodal tools. We are interested in how digital technologies make it possible to create new kinds of multimodal texts that combine semiotic systems—written language, oral language, music, images, and video. We have argued that such combinations can result in new types of texts and of meaning-making encounters (Hull & Nelson, 2005). This potential underscores the importance of giving children (and adults) access to these new technical tools and to social practices that offer meaningful uses of them. Much has

been written about the possible—usually negative—effects on children and youth of overexposure to new technologies and related media (Buckingham, 2000; Postman, 1985, 1992). This literature includes sensible worries about inappropriate subjects and characters, reduced social contact, and even a dearth of physical activity. However, relying on sociocultural theories of learning, literacy, and use of symbolic tools (Bakhtin, 1981; Vygotsky, 1934/1986; 1978), we recognize that different semiotic systems provide different affordances<sup>3</sup> for meaning-making, and that varied historical moments produce different culturally valued means for communication, knowledge production, and creative expression. Right now, in the West and indeed in many parts of the world, those means increasingly privilege digital and non-print media. No one would argue that children should not master traditional symbol systems of reading and writing. But increasingly, many claim that these systems might best be learned in connection with other modalities—especially in digital environments—and that the relative importance of modalities is shifting, as images and icons push words from the page and the screen (Kress, 2003; Mitchell, 1995, 2005). Our paper analyzes what children do when they are asked to compose, not just in words, but with images, sound, and music.

Scholars of early literacy have long taken into account children's uses of oral language and drawings as they learn the conventions and social uses of written language (Dyson, 1989, 1997, 2003; Kress, 1997). Yet relatively few scholars have examined how children compose and create by means of digital multimodality. This is especially true for children from poor socioeconomic backgrounds, who are less likely to have the chance to use such tools at home or in school (Daiute, 1992; Lenhart, Madden, & Hitlin, 2005). The context for our study was a set of educational community-based programs called DUSTY, Digital Underground Storytelling for You(th).<sup>4</sup> Operated as a nonprofit organization and working in collaboration with a university, schools, churches, and other community organizations, DUSTY's purpose was to make digital multimodal technologies available in urban neighborhoods where access to them was rare to nonexistent. Offering afterschool and summer programs, DUSTY provided an alternative environment for learning, an out-of-school space where activities, participant structures, and literacies could differ from those usually characterizing the school day. As Leon, a DUSTY participant featured in this paper, aptly put it, "DUSTY is





between school and fun.” A third purpose for our article, then, is to characterize this hybrid space and to locate it within the current expanding landscape of afterschool programs. With considerable pressure on afterschool programs to serve the academic achievement purposes of the school day—principally through federal policies such as No Child Left Behind (Meier, Kohn, Darling-Hammond,Sizer, & Wood, 2004)—it is especially important to identify the advantages of programs designed as alternatives to school-focused approaches.

Leon, for example, struggled both during school and at his afterschool program, but, as we will later demonstrate, he took important steps at DUSTY toward redefining himself as a more socially and academically engaged student. He articulated this redefinition, this burgeoning identity, in his digital story. Like researchers across a range of disciplines (Bruner, 1990, 1994; Miller & Mehler, 1994; Neisser & Fivush, 1994; Ochs & Capps, 1996, 2001), we recognize narrative as

a primary genre for identity construction. To be sure, children’s narratives serve many functions: a form of play, a means to impress, a way to be social, a vehicle for problem solving. However, more important for us, and for the DUSTY program, is the function that stories can serve in helping children and adults fashion a self, especially a self that is agentive (Hull & Katz, in press). Engel (1995) puts this nicely: “The imaginative control you gain over the world by being able to decide, at least symbolically, who does what to whom and what things look and sound like is itself a vital component of human experience” (p. 57). Curtis-Tweed (2003) has argued that such abilities take on special significance for many African-American children, who may experience considerable contextual constraints. We analyzed children’s digital stories in part to understand how the boys constructed themselves in their narratives as agents who have choices, can effect change, and have important judgments to make about their worlds.

In scholarly literature and popular media alike, negative and one-dimensional images of boys, especially African-American boys, abound. Yet our study of boys of color from an economically depressed urban center revealed that these children demonstrated many versions of male selves, and that they narrated these identities in ways that often challenged hegemonic versions of masculinity. The boys' enactments of identity were afforded both by characteristics of their afterschool social space—such as its participant structures—and the symbolic means and subject matters privileged in that space, principally digital multimodal narratives and popular culture. These features positively distinguished the experiences of most boys in their afterschool program from their experiences in school.

### THE PROBLEM OF BEING A BOY

Concerns about boys have arisen from a number of worrisome indicators about their social and academic performance and well-being. In general, boys are more likely than girls to be diagnosed with attention deficit

... boys are now generally seen to be at educational and social risk, but there is a good bit of disagreement over how to conceptualize the problem and what to do about it.

disorder, to be addicted to drugs, to appear in court, to be convicted of juvenile crime, and to commit suicide (Young & Brozo, 2001). In comparison to girls, boys are more likely to demonstrate behavioral problems in school, to be placed in remedial classes, to be retained at grade level, to be suspended, and to drop out, while they are less likely to go on to college (Rowan, Knobel, Bigum, & Lankshear, 2002). Studies have shown that boys score significantly lower than girls in reading, from elementary through high school (Newkirk, 2002). These serious problems, many of which are cross-national, have spawned a host of explanations and solutions, some of them contradictory. In the literacy field, for example, some researchers and educators have cited statistics on literacy achievement and accounts of typical classroom literacy practices to note a mismatch between boys' and teachers' preferences for reading choices and writing topics. Boys often favor

action narratives, violence, and bodily humor, while their predominantly female teachers value different kinds of genres, plot lines, and aesthetics (Dutro, 2003; Newkirk, 2002). Thus, some have argued, we should allow boys their preferred reading material in an effort to engage them in reading and give them a better chance of improving their literacy futures. Others have stressed that literacy educators must introduce both boys and girls to texts that represent gender in a variety of ways and offer many avenues toward masculine and feminine identities, as well as toward critical literacy practices that deconstruct "hegemonic" gender practices (Young & Brozo, 2001).

To put a vast and complex literature in a nutshell, boys are now generally seen to be at educational and social risk, but there is a good bit of disagreement over how to conceptualize the problem and what to do about it. However, when researchers also take into account the potent intersection of gender with other identity categories such as ethnicity and race, and with structural features such as socioeconomic class, the risks that boys face increase exponentially, while the avenues for remedy appear ever more remote—especially for African-American males. Synthesizing a range of social science literature, Noguera (2003) emphasized that "African-American males are in deep trouble" (p. 431; see also Gibbs, 1988). African-American males are more likely than boys in general, he pointed out, to be labeled as less intelligent, to be punished severely for minor offenses, to be excluded from educational opportunities such as advanced classes, and to be relegated to special education. Ferguson (2001) demonstrated in powerful if disheartening detail how school personnel construe 11- and 12-year-old African-American boys as unsalvageable, even as future criminals—and thereby single them out for punishment and position them for failure in school. Yet Noguera (2003) also reminds us that many African-American males do not fit these profiles, and many schools have served them successfully. He especially recommends looking at how African-American boys perceive schooling and related academic pursuits, as well as how they construct identities as Black and male in relation to school performance, noting, "For those who seek to help black students and males in particular, the challenge is to find ways to support their resistance to negative stereotypes and school sorting practices and to make choosing failure a less likely option for them" (p. 447).

Standards for what counts as masculine vary over time and across cultures, yet certain versions of masculinity dominate in any given period, controlling perceptions of what people consider to be attractive, natural male behaviors and suppressing alternative ones. Western versions of “hegemonic” masculinity currently privilege being white, straight, strong, athletic, competitive, and invulnerable; they rest on ideas of male superiority and subordination of others. Many believe that this identity causes problems for men and women alike, limiting the varieties of gendered selves that are valued (Connell, 1995). Yet for African-American men, the situation is almost always considerably more difficult and complex, given the legacy of racism and discrimination in the U.S. On the one hand, African-American men receive the same cultural messages as white men about what it means to be a man—that is, to dominate, protect, and provide. On the other hand, they receive continual signals about their own presumed inferiority and inability (hooks, 2004a & b). One strategic response to these contradictory and destructive messages has been to adopt what has been termed a cool pose: “motionless, fearless, aloof, and tough” (Majors & Billson, 1992, p. 5). Scholars have argued that for many young Black men, such a tough and defiant persona, with its related patterns of dress—baggy pants, big jewelry—represents a hegemonic masculinity that can narrow identity development (Reese, 2004).

Learning to enact a version of a masculine self was part of the identity work of the boys we feature in this article. To be sure, fitting into a particular gendered culture was important for many of the boys, almost all of whom were influenced by hip-hop culture, especially rap music, and its versions of masculinity. However, for these children—all on the cusp of adolescence—the process of identifying as masculine seemed to take various paths. None of these boys had yet wholly adopted a “cool pose.” In their diverse families and their ethnically mixed neighborhood and afterschool program, they came into contact with a variety of models. By describing the various masculine roles the boys represented in their digital compositions and enacted with teachers and peers in DUSTY, we hope to



provide examples for those who call for valuing multiple versions of masculinity (Rowan, Knobel, Bigum, & Lankshear, 2002).

Our interest in boys’ masculine selves and broader identities included an interest in their relationships to literacy. Rowan et al. (2002) are concerned that “narrow and restrictive understandings of normative masculinity have consequences for boys, and . . . these consequences include the construction of boys who are regularly alienated from literacy classrooms and literacy experi-

**Having an identity as a boy doesn’t, or shouldn’t, exclude having an identity as a literate and powerful communicator.**

ences” (pp. 4–5; see also Zacher, 2005). We wanted to explore how an afterschool space can allow boys to enact unconventional masculine selves, and how technology-intensive literacy activities can be designed to engage rather than alienate boys. Having an identity as a boy doesn’t, or shouldn’t, exclude having an identity as a literate and powerful communicator.

### **DIGITAL MEDIA, NARRATIVE, AND AGENCY**

We live in a media-saturated world where “images, sounds, and spectacles help produce the fabric of everyday life, dominating leisure time, shaping political views and social behavior, and providing the materials out of which people forge their very identities” (Kellner, 1995, p. 1). A media culture includes the dis-





tribution of sound, film, image, and print through traditional mass media: radio, television, newspapers, and magazines. However, in this digital age, modalities that once inhabited separate spheres are increasingly juxtaposed and blended; digital spaces such as web pages, blogs, super-phones, and computers provide chances to manipulate, create, and communicate in a variety of modes. The opportunity to communicate through multiple modalities and media, once a privilege restricted to wealthy elites, can now be the province of “ordinary” children and adults, more and more of whom have access to cutting-edge digital technologies and the means to share their work with large audiences.

There are many opposing views about the impact of living in an increasingly “mediatized” world. One stance, long influential and still prevalent, is that the messages of popular media are apt to corrupt, so children and young people should be protected from their effects. Often embedded in this view is a belief that popular culture is inferior to “high” culture; that images seduce and are inferior to print, with its long-valued associations with rationality and logic; and that young people are at the mercy of media, passively

absorbing messages and ideologies. While these views are most often associated with conservative commentators, they thread through more radical theorizing as well, as scholars across the ideological spectrum privilege print and express concerns about the potential of the visual to reproduce the status quo (Kellner, 1995).

A different stance toward mediatized culture, which also has historical roots, is gaining renewed momentum: the view that, in addition to protecting youth from media by inoculating them with big doses of critical media literacy, we might well turn the control of media production over to them. By understanding what it means to communicate and create in a variety of modalities, they will be empowered to examine the ideologies that inform media content. Indeed, the matter is often no longer one of turning something over to youth. In community centers, after-school programs, youth organizations, churches, and schools across the U.S. and the world, young people are claiming new digital media and developing their own products, genres, and distribution networks. It would be foolish to assume that simple access to new media will automatically emancipate youth, or that the chance to tell their stories will necessarily empower them (Soep & Chavez, in press). However, youth should be able to produce as well as consume media, because there is power in giving body to one's ideas and setting them forth in the world. To know why, we must understand the historical, ideological, institutional, and familial contexts for such production.

Much new research is attempting to describe the nature of youth's production of, and educational experiences with, new media. Some of this work focuses on the participant structures, pedagogies, and practices that characterize out-of-school educational efforts. Soep and Chavez (in press), for example, have written persuasively about the “pedagogy of collegiality” that characterizes Youth Radio, a broadcast training program for students aged 14 to 18. Other work has focused on incorporating digital media into schools and community organizations. In a volume of case studies written by practitioners, Sefton-Green (1999) has explored the range of ways that new digital arts are affecting traditional schooling. Other researchers have begun to interrogate long-standing views about media—such as the notion that television has direct negative consequences for children's academic and social development—simply by asking what actual uses youth make of media. Howard (1998) and her colleagues studied how children, youth, and young

adults used a panoply of digital media, including television, video, video games, and telephones. Such research highlights the kinds of arrangements for learning that characterize out-of-school spaces. Researchers and educators are learning to complicate overly simplistic causal models of the intersection of media with learning, as they begin to glimpse the array of ways young people use new media to engage as learners and doers in the world (Willis, 1990).

Our research on digital media shares many of these interests, especially the importance of media production as well as critical consumption. We focused particularly on the interfaces between new media, narrative, and identity construction. A rich body of research captures the important role that narratives of self—stories about who we have been in the past and who we want to become in the future—can play in the construction of identities (Ochs & Capps, 1996, 2001). Our “lives are the pasts we tell ourselves,” write Ochs and Capps (1996, p. 21). This holds for children, too, as Miller (1994) and her colleagues demonstrate in their extensive work on the functions of storytelling in early childhood socialization and self-construction. Hall (1996) also links identity construction to narrative and self-representation. “Identities,” he writes, “are...constituted within, not outside, representation” (p. 4), and “they arise from the narrativization of the self” (p. 4). To summarize the almost isomorphic relationship of narrative to self, Bruner (1994) explains that one’s “self is a perpetually rewritten story” (p. 53).

Our research explores the power of “mediatized” narratives (Lundby, 2005), or digital stories, as a means by which children can construct narratives of self, family, and community. Recent media studies direct much attention to the power of narrative, especially in gaming, where theorists have embarked on enthusiastic considerations of how youth become immersed in video games through the narratives and subject positions the games promote (Wardrip-Fruin & Harrigan, 2004; Wolf & Perron, 2003). Much less attention has been paid, however, to the multimodal, multimedia narratives of self that youth themselves construct; this is especially true for younger children, who are less likely to have access to the tools that make such construction possible (Hull & James, in press; Hull & Katz, in press). If stories told orally are powerful sites of self-construction, what might be the import of layered modalities—speech, music, images, video—for this process (Hull, 2003)? In other research

(Hull & Nelson, 2005), we have argued that multimodal composition represents a qualitatively new form of meaning-making and a distinctively different experience from that of reading a print-based text. In the research reported here, we explore the potential for boys of this kind of composition, asking what affordances it offered for constructing representations of themselves and their social worlds. We were also interested in how, especially in the context of an out-of-school program, children actively drew on a wealth of cultural resources, including popular media—comic books, music, television, movies—to create digital stories (Brown, 1999; Dyson, 1997, 2003; Hudak, 1999).

Digital narratives and their multimodal affordances have been our window on the ways in which the boys in our study enacted a sense of self. Their stories offered up an array of past, current, and possible selves: as once sickly but now healthy, as once a trouble-maker but now a student who can follow the rules. The boys constructed themselves as heroes and travelers with adventures to recount; as responsible guardians of pets, fair solvers of disputes, wise social

In community centers, afterschool programs, youth organizations, churches, and schools across the U.S. and the world, young people are claiming new digital media and developing their own products, genres, and distribution networks.

critics, and loyal friends; and as boys on the path to becoming men like their dads. In examining the digital stories and situating them in the afterschool program and in the children’s lives at home and at school, we were especially interested in whether and how the selves the boys enacted were agentive. Debates about structure and agency have been hallmarks of much social science research over the last thirty years, as theorists have attempted to reconcile the ways in which individuals and groups either reproduce the social order or influence it (Bourdieu, 1977; De Certeau, 1984; Fairclough, 1989; Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998; Scott, 1985; Wenger, 1998). Most current theorists believe that people can act as agents

even in the most oppressive circumstances, although that ability is, in general, sharply constrained (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Children are the most constrained of all social actors; parents and caretakers, schools, and society regulate their activities and choices. Yet children are indeed agents in their own social worlds. As they grow, they claim more and more autonomy as social actors. We are interested in the role of multimodal learning and expression in this

## One important tension in the afterschool movement has to do with the control of bodies through the organization of material and social space.

process, as well as the role that an afterschool program can play when it provides structures that allow children to exercise agency. To what extent, we wondered, did the boys represent themselves as agents who could make choices and exercise judgment, who could analyze and influence the world around them, or who could imagine different and better futures? Because these children were people of color and had all experienced, to some degree, the challenges that accompany inner-city life in a racist society, cultivating and enacting a sense of agency was a crucially important part of their boyhood (Walker & Snarey, 2004). In the words of Curtis-Tweed (2003), “African Americans, like all people of colour, must develop and sustain positive perceptions of themselves, their context and self-in-context to counter the effects of societal marginalization” (p. 408).

### AFTERSCHOOL SPACES

One of the support systems for African-American boys that Noguera (2003) advocates, as a partial counter to often-hostile school environments, is out-of-school education by community organizations and churches. Indeed, over the past ten years, afterschool programs have flowered, accompanied by a growing literature documenting their practices and efficacy—and by a growing federal regulatory system that has attempted to shape their purposes, especially in relation to formal schooling. As Halpern (2003) has demonstrated in his history of afterschool programs for low-income children in the U.S., tensions over the roles of afterschool programs are hardly new. Such programs have strug-

gled, almost since their beginnings in the last decades of the nineteenth century, to define themselves in relation to other institutions, “notably children’s families, the schools, and the streets” (p. 5). At various times in their century-long history, afterschool programs have sought to “complement, supplement, counter, and even supplant” (Halpern, 2003, p. 5) these other institutions, but they have had an especially rocky relationship with schools. They have often characterized themselves in opposition to school-based practices and values, especially where immigrant or other “at-risk” children were concerned. During the 1990s, an infusion of federal aid and substantial support from private foundations brought about an arranged marriage of sorts between schools and afterschool providers, a union intended to improve low-income children’s academic achievement. The pressure has never been greater for afterschool programming to mirror and extend the school day. Lines have been drawn in the sand, with some agencies and advocates embracing a union while others resist, to a greater or lesser extent, the imposition of school-based practices in afterschool spaces (Noam, Biancarosa, & Dechausay, 2003; Noam, 2004).

One important tension in the afterschool movement has to do with the control of bodies through the organization of material and social space. In schools, where attendance is compulsory, children’s movements and forms of participation are generally circumscribed to conform to institutional rules and material environments. Afterschool programs, which have traditionally been voluntary, offer at least the possibility of organizing children’s participation to allow more intellectual and creative agency and freedom of movement (Cole, 1996). Yet adults’ understandable interest in, and responsibility for, protecting and socializing children through control over space has always been with us. In fact, afterschool programs originated when the need for child labor decreased, a commitment to compulsory schooling grew, and adults came to view unsupervised time as unsafe (Halpern, 2003). Eventually, prompted by these concerns and a desire to “improve” working-class children, educators and researchers developed playground and other outdoor programs, which then expanded to include indoor activities. Children’s freedom to play in the streets was decreased, their playtime increasingly supervised, and their control over space and physical movement constrained. Historical studies report that many youth voted with their feet, spending their time on stoops and in the streets; in fact, they ranked settlement

houses as their least favorite places (Wasserman, 1991).

Nowadays, worries about the street have, if anything, intensified, and children are ever more confined and supervised. Kelley (1997), writing in defense of the Black urban poor, notes, "For inner city families, the threat of drive-bys has turned porches and front doors, which once spilled out onto sidewalks and streets as extensions of play areas, into fortified entrances with iron 'screen' doors that lock from the inside" (p. 52). As public leisure places disappear, as funding for parks and recreation centers withers, as worries about the possibility of violence increase, people are again looking to afterschool programs to take youth from the streets, involve them in productive activities, and inculcate values of work and discipline—all reminiscent of turn-of-the-century Progressive-era practices. Kelley warns, however, that "more social control will do little to unleash and develop the creative capacities of black urban youth. Rather than try to change the person through rigid regimentation and supervised play, we need to change the streets themselves, the built environ-

ment, the economy, and the racist discourse that dominates popular perceptions of black youth" (p. 76).

What an important and interesting challenge for today's afterschool programs: to address simultaneously the desires of parents, school officials, and agents of the federal government to provide safe spaces for academic achievement, while recognizing how an afterschool program might be constructed as a social and physical space that appeals to children's growing need for increased autonomy and provides opportunities to create, embrace, and reinvent popular cultural forms. We were interested in the ways in which DUSTY achieved a balance between being connected to school while simultaneously being a non-school space where children could flourish, even if—especially if—they were not successful at school. Which of its features resembled school, and which did not? How was it a "liminal" (Bhabha, 1994) space, a borderland between other institutions, in terms of the social and symbolic resources it provided and the modes of participation it fostered? And particularly, what was the importance of this hybrid space for boys?





## METHODOLOGY

### Context

Over the last five years, we have helped to found, fund, operate, and research a community technology center in West Oakland, California, a local bus ride away from the University of California, Berkeley. DUSTY was designed to make powerful forms of signification—specifically, tools for and practices of digital multimodal composing—available to children and adults who didn't otherwise have access to them. A university and community partnership, it has drawn professors, undergraduates, and graduate students together with youth and children from the community to learn, play, and create.

West Oakland is known for its high rates of joblessness and crime, a deteriorating infrastructure, and struggling schools. It has few of the ordinary resources most communities take for granted, such as supermarkets, bookstores, restaurants, and banks. Many of its grand old Victorians, once summer homes for the San Francisco wealthy, have been renovated and occupied by outsiders as gentrification marches forward. Yet the citizens in this area—mostly long-time African-American residents, joined of late by immigrants from

**DUSTY was designed to make powerful forms of signification—specifically, tools for and practices of digital multimodal composing—available to children and adults who didn't otherwise have access to them.**

Southeast Asia, Mexico, and Latin America—have been finding ways to reclaim the community. With a rich history to build on, including a significant role in the civil rights movement, and with memories of a thriving economy related to ship-building and transportation around mid-century, residents are working toward safer, healthier, more equitable futures. DUSTY is a small piece of this much larger fabric of community growth and change.

DUSTY started as a center to teach digital storytelling, a form of multimedia composition consisting of images and video segments combined with background music and voice-over narrative. Digital stories are, in effect, brief movies, featuring the digitized voice

of the author, who narrates a personally composed story, and an assemblage of visual artifacts—photographs old and new, images found on the Internet, snippets of video, anything that can be converted to digital form. In our experience, digital stories have wide appeal, in part simply because they are multimodal and digital, thereby giving children and adults access to compositional means and rights that used to be associated exclusively with mass media. They are often popular, too, because they privilege a personal voice and allow participants to draw on popular culture and local knowledge. Our youth sometimes feature their own original beats, drawn from Oakland's distinctive hip-hop sound, as background music for their digital stories, instead of relying on commercial hits. A culminating activity at DUSTY is viewing participants' digital stories on the big screen of a local theater. On such occasions, we invite the young artists to answer questions from the audience after the showing. This is one example of how, in the design of our curriculum and participant structures, we position digital storytellers as authors, composers, and designers who are expert and powerful communicators, people with things to say that the world should hear. Many DUSTY youth have not developed a sense of an authorial and agentive self in other settings, including school, so the opportunity to do so in an alternative educational site becomes all the more important.

Staff members at DUSTY are drawn from the community and the university. Together their backgrounds, identities, and experiences make a richly textured quilt of different ages, races and ethnicities, genders, and languages. Racial and ethnic diversity, though typical of the Bay Area, is not common in West Oakland, where outsiders are relatively rare and ethnically diverse people do not usually mix. Yet at DUSTY, instructors are African American, Asian American, East Indian, Latino, White. In addition, a calling card of this program is its connection to a university service-learning course, through which dozens of undergraduate students volunteer as tutors and mentors. These undergraduate tutors are representative of the diversity of UC Berkeley, where Asian-American students comprise the campus majority. The DUSTY scene is thereby set: an exceptionally diverse group of adult and young adult mentors interacting with children and youth from a largely African-American, but demographically shifting, community—each learning from the other. This social space provides important, even crucial, opportunities for working and learning across identity



categories, as we will illustrate with the stories of the boys featured in this paper.

Along with creating and operating DUSTY, we have engaged in work related to the relatively recent tradition of “design research” (Collins, Joseph, & Bielaczyc, 2004). In this model, development of programs, curricula, and tools is intertwined with ongoing attempts to assess and improve development efforts, to document what participants have learned, and (in our case) to theorize about multimodal composing and identity formation. Over the years, we have collected a variety of ethnographic and qualitative data, principally field notes from participant observations and interviews. We have also videotaped and audiotaped teaching activities, workshops, and community events, including showings of digital stories. Our data also include pre- and post-inventories and surveys, which assess not only what kids and adults learn, but also how their notions of self as author and communicator develop. Of late, because of funders’ requirements, we have begun to gather test scores, attendance records, and grades from school, in anticipation of matched-sample comparisons that will

allow us to investigate statistically, using standardized measures, whether participation in DUSTY affects school-based achievement. Lastly, we continually archive the digital stories and other artifacts that participants create.

### **Data Collection: Selecting Focal Stories and Child Authors**

For this study, we examined our archive to locate digital stories created by elementary school boys. In the course of a previous study (Hull & James, in press), we had made the simple discovery that more boys than girls seemed to create digital stories about particular places, especially neighborhoods. That observation—and the knowledge that boys in general, but African-American boys in particular, are at risk of doing poorly in school—inspired us to focus especially on the boys who had attended DUSTY, their stories, and their participation in the program. We narrowed our focus to boys in elementary school because all four of us had had direct experience in the DUSTY program with this age group, serving as instructors, tutors, and researchers; over several years we had col-

lected a range of data on this age group. We initially identified 23 stories by elementary school boys from our archive. These stories, and their child authors, were potential candidates for our case studies.

To determine which of the child authors and their multimodal stories to select for more intensive study, we first carried out preliminary content analyses of their digital products. We watched each story multiple times in order to note its themes. A content analysis revealed a range of themes, including triumph over adversity, heroism, friendship, the importance of family, and freedom and independence, with an accompanying range of sub-themes including poverty, death, the

range and variation of these themes, sub-themes, and genres, as illustrated in Table 1. In addition, in choosing these stories—and thereby choosing potential focal children for our case studies—we made sure that the child authors represented the racial and ethnic mix of the West Oakland neighborhood and the DUSTY program.

In order to situate our analyses of the boys' multimodal compositions in a detailed understanding of their participation in DUSTY and of their schools, neighborhoods, and families, we assembled a variety of additional data. These data included artifacts from their work at DUSTY, including their writings, draw-

TABLE 1. DIGITAL STORY INFORMATION

Student	Semester Movie Made	Movie Title	Length	Number of Images	Subject	Media Used	Narrative Voice
Taj	Summer 2004	<i>Delicate Man: The One-Eyed Superhero</i>	2:02	42	Adventures of a vulnerable superhero	Garage band, drawings, Adobe Photoshop and Premiere	1st person
Leon	Spring 2004	<i>How DUSTY Changed My Life</i>	2:39	21	DUSTY's role in Leon's writing development	Music CD, digital camera, Adobe Photoshop and Premiere, scanner	1st and 3rd person
Clinton	Summer 2004	<i>My Ninja Turtle Problem</i>	8:15	132 (23 images repeated)	A trip to Reno and a transformation into a Ninja turtle	Music CD, scanner, Adobe Photoshop and Premiere, drawings, Internet images	1st, 2nd, and 3rd person
James	Summer 2004	<i>Pits</i>	2:15	30 (6 images repeated)	Pit bulls and how they interact with each other	Digital camera, Adobe Photoshop and Premiere, music CD, Internet images	3rd person
André	Fall 2002	<i>Lemonade</i>	2:50	32	Being born sickly and abandoned, growing into a healthy, happy boy	Music CD, digital camera, Adobe Premiere, Internet images	1st and 3rd person
Patrick	Fall 2002	<i>When I Went Fishing</i>	3:44	18	The story of a fishing trip with Patrick's dad and uncle	Internet images and music, Adobe Photoshop and Premiere, digital camera	1st person
Manuel	Spring 2003	<i>X-Men Evolution</i>	2:45	30	Favorite X-Men eating fried squirrel	Internet images and music, Adobe Photoshop and Premiere, camera	1st and 3rd person
Malcom	Spring 2004	<i>The Boondocks</i>	2:08	30 (6 images repeated)	Introduction to the comic <i>The Boondocks</i> and why you should read it	Internet, scanner, music CD, Adobe Photoshop and Premiere	3rd person
Jamal	Summer 2004	<i>My Neighborhood</i>	1:32	19 (1 image repeated)	A poem about Jamal's interpretation of his neighborhood through his senses	Internet, scanner, music CD, Adobe Photoshop, digital camera	1st person

police, popular culture (video games, comic books), sports, pets, fathers and mothers, food, religion, and neighborhood. We also devised an initial category system to capture the range of genres that the children's digital stories represented: factual autobiographies, fictive autobiographies, reports, and cartoons or superhero tales. We selected 12 stories that captured the

ings, notes, and storyboards; field notes documenting their interactions with other children in the program; audiotaped retrospective interviews about their movies; and interviews with DUSTY instructors, school personnel, and family members. For some children, we had still more data: field notes or videotapes of their movie premieres, field notes of our visits to

their homes, formal and informal interviews with parents, e-mail messages to and from parents, and additional digital stories that some children authored at DUSTY. During this process, we eliminated further analysis of three of the original 12 children because we were unable to obtain the information we needed to construct case studies.

In Table 2, we provide demographic data about our focal children, along with information about when they participated in DUSTY. Given that these boys largely resided in West Oakland, with a few traveling from another low-income area of the city, and that many attended schools where lunch was subsidized for the majority of students, we would be within the conventions of social science research simply to attribute low socioeconomic status to these children and their families. However, the approach of our project entailed discovering the diversity that characterizes children who are labeled “at risk.” Poverty affected the boys’ lives in different and sometimes complicated ways. Some children brought voracious appetites to snack time at DUSTY and always asked for additional food to eat or take away, while others would eat the snack only if they liked it. Some boys had a new shirt or at least a clean shirt each day, while others wore the same clothes for days in a row. Some students told involved stories about their weekend social activities, but other students did not. Some lived in Section 8 housing, some lived with parents who paid regular rent, and others bunked with extended family members or were homeless. Some did well in school; others fared quite poorly. The children also varied in their peer status compared to the other children at DUSTY: Some had a great deal of social purchase, while others were unpopular and at times ostracized. The availability of additional support —through church, extended family, and out-of-school resources beyond DUSTY—varied as well. These variations suggest the complexities of circumstance that accompany children to an afterschool program, even when they live on the same block or hail from the same neighborhood.

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### Data Analysis Framework and Research Questions

We transcribed all audio and videotapes, as well as each child’s digital story. For Taj, our featured case study, we created a table in which the child’s narration was paired with his accompanying images and a description of his music; Table 3 is an excerpt. We assembled all of our data into looseleaf notebooks, one for each child. We proceeded with an open coding of the data, reading line-by-line and noting salient pat-

TABLE 2. DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Name of Student	Age	Ethnicity	Living Situation	Place of Residence	Semesters in DUSTY
Taj	9	African American and East Indian	Only child, lived with mother	West Oakland	Summer 2004
Leon	10	African American	Only child, lived with mother and her boyfriend (who took an active parental role)	West Oakland	Fall 2003, Spring 2004
Clinton	9	African American	Lived with mother and siblings	West Oakland	Summer 2003, Summer 2004
James	11	African American	Lived with mother and siblings, had regular contact with father	West Oakland	Fall 2003, Spring 2004
André	12	African American	Lived with adoptive mother	West Oakland	Fall 2002, Spring 2003
Patrick	10	Cambodian American	Lived with mother, father, and sister	West Oakland	Fall 2002
Manuel	10	Mexican American	Lived with mother, father, and siblings	West Oakland	Fall 2002, Spring 2003, Summer 2003
Malcolm	11	African American	Lived with mother, father, and younger sister	East Oakland	Spring 2004, Summer 2004
Jamal	9	African American	Lived with mother, father, and siblings	East Oakland	Summer 2004



terns, marking these in the margins, and keeping a running list of descriptors that we reorganized and renamed as new categories emerged, in a procedure recommended by Miles (1994). Though we initially organized our data by child, we also reorganized it according to emerging themes, so that we could make comparisons across children; we could notice similarities and differences in the ways children interacted with DUSTY adults and each other, appropriated technologies, engaged in multimodal composing, and developed academically and socially. As we proceeded,

TABLE 3. DELICATE MAN'S INITIAL IMAGES AND MUSIC

Images	Music
Still of Delicate Man with title	Fast music, two bars
Transition	Flute music, one bar
Playground: Boy in green looking at cluster of dodge balls	Flute music
Dodge balls move towards boy	Fast music
Boy flies into air	Melancholy music
Boy moves towards ground	Fast music
Transition	
Night time: boy lying on ground, scientist on right	Fast music
Scientist moves towards the boy	Music continues
Scientist's foot moves	Music continues
Figures shift slightly	Music continues
Scientist moves toward boy, hand moves	Music continues; sound drops out briefly
Transition	
Orange background, robber on left with "Cops Stink" T-shirt. DM on right facing away from the robber. Knife suspended in the air between the two figures.	Music resumes and crescendos, drum roll Drum roll continues Fast music resumes for one bar

we took note of "key events" (Dyson & Genishi, 2005), richly textured moments that drew together several thematic threads and could be used illustratively within and across cases.

While our methods for analyzing our qualitative data were inductive, theoretical interests and our reading of related literature also guided us. For example, we knew that recent scholarship on masculinity had identified certain ways of enacting manhood as "hegemonic," and that African-American males have been portrayed as responding to these dominant models with particular kinds of self-enactments, such as a "cool pose" (Majors & Billson, 1992). However, we believed that for elementary school boys, notions of a

masculine self were still very much in the making.<sup>5</sup> We therefore wanted to be alert to enactments of many kinds of masculinity, and so we coded for those. In addition, we knew from the literature that boys sometimes don't flourish in school because their predilections for reading and writing often don't match school-based curricula. We hoped, however, that in an alternative out-of-school space that provided different participant structures and materials for reading and writing activities, boys might find a more accessible path toward engaging with literacy. Thus, we were alert to the potential for both literacy-related problems and literacy-related progress. Further, our familiarity with the literature on digital multimodality led us to expect that boys might find their literacy "sea legs" through the mediation of multiple modes and computers, especially if they were allowed to draw on popular culture and local knowledge. Thus, we were primed to take note of how the children made use of a variety of symbol systems, and whether and how they engaged in communication, creation, and play using computers.

Finally, a theoretical concern in our previous work centered on agency (Hull & Katz, in press). To what extent do individuals who face, even as children, a variety of social and material constraints nonetheless develop agentic senses of self when they are appropriately supported in that effort? We thus examined our data, including the boys' digital stories, for indications that the boys were constructing and enacting senses of self capable of affecting their social worlds. In doing so, we found the conceptualization of agency offered by Emirbayer and Mische (1998) helpful: "a temporally embedded process of social engagement" (p. 963) that is shaped by understandings of relationships to the past, present, and future. We also drew on Curtis-Tweed (2003), who notes that if African Americans and other people of color are to formulate a sense of agency in an oppressive society, they "must rely on self-perceptions, independent of the images reflected by the dominant culture" (p. 401). Situating her work within American pragmatist philosophical traditions, especially the work of William James, W. E. B. Du Bois, Ralph Ellison, and Cornel West, Curtis-Tweed defined the operation of agency as "the perception of (1) context, (2) choice and (3) the ability to change" (p. 402). This work alerted us to the significance of noting when boys were thinking critically about their worlds and exercising judgment in their daily lives. We were especially interested in the boys'

attempts to alter their own behavior and attitudes. Finally, we examined what we call “authorial agency” in the boys’ digital stories. Drawing on our own past research (Hull & Katz, in press), as well as traditions from linguistic anthropology (Bauman & Briggs, 1990; Dyson, 2003), we noted instances of the powerful authorial moves of “decontextualization” and “retextualization,” which can be defined for our purposes as taking language, images, or ideas from one context and resituating them in another, making them serve one’s own ends. As Bauman and Briggs (1990) explain, “To decontextualize and recontextualize a text is thus an act of control, and in regard to the differential exercise of such control the issue of social power arises” (p. 76). This semiotic strategy may be an especially powerful one in afterschool settings, and it may be especially afforded by multiple modalities, when children are allowed and encouraged to draw on local knowledge, popular culture, and multiple symbol systems as they create.

We used this framework and these methods to address the following research questions:

- What images of self were revealed in the boys’ digital stories?
- What elements of popular and local culture did the boys appropriate for their stories and for what purposes?
- What were the constraints and affordances of digital multimodal composing and print-based composing for the boys?
- What features of their afterschool space seemed most conducive to their participation and learning, and to the construction of positive and possibly “agentive” senses of self?

### **THE CASE OF TAJ: A VULNERABLE SUPERHERO “Dial-up is old school.”**

Nine-year-old Taj came to DUSTY’s summer program with many, many questions. His first one, by way of introducing himself, was directed to his teacher, Miss Nora: “What kind of animation software do you have?” he inquired in his high-pitched voice, articulating his words precisely, as was his style. When she answered that DUSTY used Adobe Premiere for its digital storytelling projects, Taj immediately queried her further about its 3-D functionality and animation components. This initial exchange hinted at what we were later to learn in detail about Taj’s talents, resources, and challenges. He loved and was adept with computers, but he had other diverse interests. Here are

excerpts from a long list of his interests provided by his mother, Sonja, as part of her e-mail efforts to find a compatible school for him the year after he participated in DUSTY: space, the 3rd and 5th dimensions, computerized games and computer animation of various kinds, drawing, cooking, the didgeridoo and the cello, rugby and yoga, movies, building soundtracks for animations and stories, the beach, Greek mythology, Halloween and costuming, fantasy play with made-up characters, frilled lizards and Komodo dragons, Alaska, Antarctica, and the Aurora Borealis! This magical list of diverse interests is a reminder of the rich panoply of topics and activities that can captivate young minds.

**He thrived on digitally afforded movement: quick transitions between pictures in an animation, lots of physical action in plotlines, fast-paced “techno” music, and the chance to flip back and forth among several open programs on a computer’s desktop.**

Taj not only had many interests and a million questions to accompany each; he also had definite opinions about his dislikes. For example, he did not like noise. He noted on his “More about.... You!” DUSTY questionnaire, given to all children at the beginning of the program, that he did not like his neighborhood because “some people hang by the liquor sto[r]e talking loud all night.” To sit still was a special torture for him. He thrived on digitally afforded movement: quick transitions between pictures in an animation, lots of physical action in plotlines, fast-paced “techno” music, and the chance to flip back and forth among several open programs on a computer’s desktop. He did not easily tolerate anything that he experienced as injustice or unfairness to himself, at DUSTY or at school, and he often demanded explanations from adults in situations when many children might simply be resigned. He took “why” questions to a new height and readily confessed, “I get on my teacher’s nerves!” He had his own agenda for how he preferred to spend his time and the types of projects he found engaging. For example, Taj came to DUSTY with one purpose and one purpose only: to create an animated story. It was hard to engage him in anything that



he saw as straying from this goal. All of this—his propensity to question, to complain, to move about, to be self-directed, and, as we will show, to mediate his activities digitally and multimodally whenever possible—added up to a gigantic mismatch between Taj and his elementary school on both an academic and a social level and sometimes made him a lightning rod for negative attention from his peers, especially other boys.

In this case study, we reveal some of the social progress that Taj made at the DUSTY summer program, as he became more accepted by and accepting of his peers, and as he developed trusting relationships with his teachers and tutors. This reorientation occurred partly through the social purchase he acquired by his growing expertise with digital multimodality, and partly through his inventive use of popular cultural conventions and digital multimodal narration to reposition himself authorially. His reorientation had to do, as well, with DUSTY's hybrid social space: a space that combined some of the characteristics of school with some of the characteristics of play, and that provided access not only to digital tools, but also to social support from teachers, assistant teachers, technology specialists, tutors, and children.

Taj represents one important version of the child of the future—presuming that the future is a digital one—with his predilection for an assortment of the mediational tools available online or through software (Gee, 2004). To be sure, some traditional literacy practices, such as writing by hand, were a tall hurdle for Taj. Yet of all the children we have known at DUSTY, this boy represented the tightest union of interests and talents with available digital tools and modes of expression. Thus, he taught us a great deal about the habits of mind and literate digital practices that may soon be commonplace for children growing up in this age (but will likely continue to elude many adults). “Dial-up is old school,” he once commented, and so it is to a child like Taj. However, while Taj was advanced technologically, he was a socially and historically situated young person, someone who struggled, as most of us must do, with finding a social niche, as well as an ethnic, racial, and gendered sense of self. We salute him as much for his engagement with his social becoming as we do for his ever-burgeoning technical and symbolic expertise.

### **“They think I’m Mexican.”**

Early on Miss Nora, the DUSTY instructor, and Taj’s peers were introduced to his single-minded focus on things digital and technological as well as his intense need to have his own concerns attended to. The first week of the program, one of the DUSTY volunteers, a university student, wrote a detailed set of field notes about the activities that occurred over a span of approximately 45 minutes. According to this tutor’s notes, boys played action-oriented computer games, conferences with children were held, visitors came and went, and a rap song in which one of the DUSTY children had been featured as a back-up singer was shared with a small group of adult and child admirers. During all of these activities, Taj didn’t leave his computer or engage with the visitors, tutors, or other children. Instead he focused with laser-like intensity on his self-determined task at hand. The undergraduate tutor noted that midway through the activities, “Taj was still searching for Crash Test Dummies, looking at prices on Ebay, and getting pictures of the game from Google,” an observation that became a chorus throughout her notes.

Such focus and determination served Taj well in quickly accumulating technological expertise and his impressive knowledge base. In our field notes and interviews with Taj and his mom, we noted again and again his impressive agility with a variety of software programs, Internet searches, and what seemed to us very complicated users’ guides. In fact, when Taj came to DUSTY, according to our formal assessment of his technological skills as well as his own self-assessment, he had already mastered basic computer skills, such as organizing via folders and using e-mail, and he knew how to use the Internet for searches. He did not know how to scan pictures, to use Adobe Photoshop to alter images, or to use I-Movie or Adobe Premiere to create multimodal movies, but he acquired these technical skills with alacrity.

It was more difficult for Taj to learn to fit in socially. From the start he had difficulties even sitting next to his classmates, especially any of four other boys: Angel, Loren, Brandon, and Jermaine. These four boys, two sets of brothers, comprised a group of long-time friends and neighbors. All four participated actively on sports teams. Although he was the youngest of the four, Jermaine demonstrated many leadership qualities—traits, according to his teacher, that were acknowledged by his brother, his friends, and the rest of the class. By contrast, Taj—noticeably bow-legged and tending toward chubbiness—was not

athletic, and he did not endear himself to most of the children. According to his teacher, he often loudly complained that the other boys were making too much noise, invading his “personal space,” or not following rules; he was not above “telling on” Angel, Loren, Brandon, and Jermaine whenever an opportunity presented itself. Altercations were frequent, especially during outdoor playtime, when the more athletic and popular boys regularly pelted Taj during dodge ball games. Nonetheless, Taj continually sought opportunities to play with them. As we will see, so salient for him were these events that they figured prominently in the plot of his animated digital story.

The peer-related difficulties that Taj experienced are certainly not unusual, as most children vie for social status in peer networks that are of necessity influenced by adult cultures and societal values concerning the personal characteristics—skin color, physical build, personality, athleticism—that foster desire and carry cachet. Yet Taj faced more challenges in this regard than most, for he stood out as different in a number of ways. In this largely African-American neighborhood, most children and adults were easily identified as Black. Even children who were not Black were at least conversant with and often influenced by African-American youth culture, enjoying rap music and effortlessly absorbing Black speech forms—features of African-American Vernacular English (AAVE)—into their language patterns. Taj was African American on his mother’s side with roots in Creole and Cajun culture, while his dad’s heritage was East Indian, by way of Trinidad. He was definitely aware of his rich mixed ancestry. “I’m actually Indian, Trinidadian, umm, Jewish, and Irish, and I can’t think of the other one,” he told Miss Nora. He also noted that when asked about his ethnicity, he usually chose not to respond, “because it’s a long list.” But he did not seem to identify as African American, and unlike virtually all of his DUSTY classmates, Taj never code-switched from Standard English to AAVE. When asked what ethnicity children associated him with, Taj replied, “They think I’m Mexican.”

Indeed, Taj’s DUSTY instructor believed that some of Taj’s social difficulties arose because the other boys in the program “couldn’t really figure out what to make of him” racially and ethnically. She subsequently discussed this possibility with Taj’s mom and invited her to come to a DUSTY class, believing her identity as African American would take away some of the puzzle about Taj. On two occasions Sonja visited and interacted with the class, once leading a storybook reading, and



on the second occasion using her expertise as a professional photographer, teaching the children basic photographic angles such as a “bird’s eye view.” Miss Nora believed that these visits did have a positive effect on how children viewed Taj. However, being different seemed to be a central, persistent identity feature for Taj, one that held both positive and negative consequences for him. On the one hand, he delighted in his own uniqueness and his status as an only and quite special child. He wrote once on a DUSTY questionnaire that if he could live anywhere it would be “a private planet because it would be all mine”; for a journal exercise on being principal for a day, Taj chose to be the principal of a “science fiction school of weirdness.” Yet, Taj worried about being picked on “because you’re weird,” and related a story about such a family member who’d been attacked and had later died. These themes bobbed to the top for Taj, not only in casual conversation and interactions, but in his digital story as well.

### **“I’m going to make movies and video games for a living.”**

One of the pedagogical practices in the DUSTY summer program was to address children by titles associated with the careers they expected to have when they grew up, thereby honoring and supporting the adult identities they were working toward. Thus, it was “Engineer Clinton” and “Dr. Cristina” and “Rapper Malcolm.” Taj wanted to be an animator and moviemaker, as he would explain to anyone who would listen, with or without their prompting. As he clicked on his movie icon on the desktop of a DUSTY computer in order to show it a tutor, Taj noted:

- Taj: I’m going to make movies and video games for a living. My first one is going to be Zach the Opossum. It’ll be done by 2007.
- Christine: How old are you now?
- Taj: Nine.
- Christine: And how old will you be when Zach the Opossum is done?
- Taj: Twelve.
- Christine: That’s impressive.

Impressive indeed, as was the digital story that became the centerpiece of Taj’s summer at DUSTY. Taj called his digital story *Delicate Man: A One-Eyed Superhero*. It consisted of 42 colorful images, each of which Taj painstakingly designed, drew, and illustrated using Adobe Photoshop software, and then assembled

using Adobe Premiere. Taj had wanted to create a genuine animation with state-of-the-art software, but because DUSTY didn’t have the software he needed, he made do with the tools at hand, juxtaposing and link-

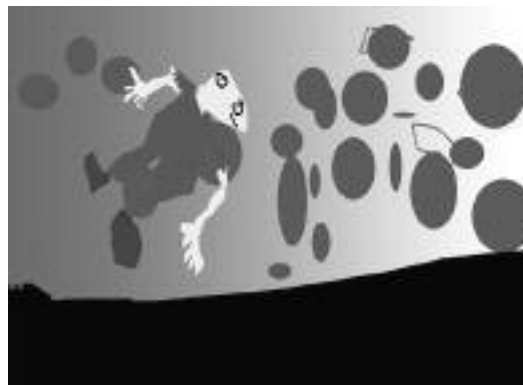


Figure 1. Pelted with Dodge Balls



Figure 2. The Vulnerable Hero Strikes Back

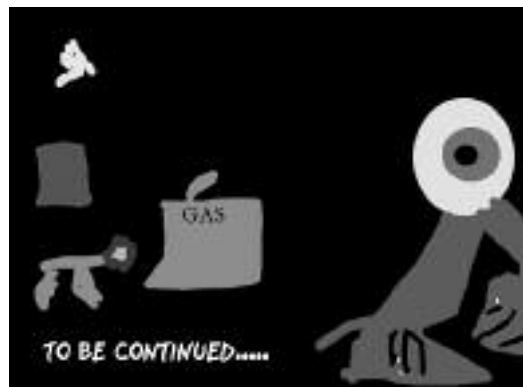


Figure 3. The Promise of a Sequel

ing his individual images to provide the illusion of movement. He narrated his images with his own voice recording, enacting the characters and the storyline. In the background he added fast-paced instrumental music he had created himself at home, sampling and blending melodies he downloaded from the Internet.

Taj's story featured a fictional character, "Delicate Man," whom he had originally created, he and his mom recalled, when he was six years old. The story began with a boy at whom "a thousand people" threw dodge balls (Figure 1). A scientist found the boy lying on the ground and transported him to his laboratory to examine him, but he accidentally dropped him into a mutating machine that turned him into Delicate Man. Delicate Man, a superhero whose only power was to break into pieces, had no arms, but he did have very long legs that allowed him to run quickly. "It was hard being Delicate Man," Taj explained in a draft of his story. When someone bumped into Delicate Man, he fell into pieces. However, falling into pieces did have its advantages, since Delicate Man could hurl his legs and use them as defensive weapons. In Taj's digital story, when a robber swung a dagger at Delicate Man, he pretended to be "sliced," but then ambushed the robber and put him in jail (Figure 2). Soon another bad guy likewise ambushed Delicate Man, threatening to blow him up and not put him back together. The story ended, in true episodic fashion, with a promise "to be continued" (Figure 3).

Taj's digital story is impressive in its inventiveness: his clever appropriation of the superhero genre, his expression of an aesthetic that is alert to color and shape and line, his sense for the dramatic, and his skill at braiding together and orchestrating (Kress, 2003; Mitchell, 2004) different modes of expression for their best combined effect. However, these multimodal talents and predilections did not map onto, or follow linearly from, print-based literacy. The DUSTY curriculum for creating digital stories began with a variety of print-based activities. Students first completed boxes in a "Short Story Writer's Guide" that asked, for example, "What is your topic?" "Where will your story take place?" They proceeded with a story map (with completion boxes for setting, characters, plot and events), multiple drafts of a written story, and then a storyboard that paired text with descriptions or drawings of the images that would accompany the narration. Although DUSTY was a technology-intensive program, much of the writing and drawing nevertheless was done with paper and pencil. Taj had great physical difficulty creating a legible text in this conventional way. After it became clear that he would not be able to compose or transcribe a story on paper, DUSTY instructors wrote his words for him as he dictated. Multiple drafts emerged this way: a tutor's transcription in her handwriting of Taj's spoken story; several word-processed revisions done under Taj's direction;

and, finally, a word-processed version that was divided into sections on the page, which his helpers thought would facilitate Taj's reading when he recorded his voice digitally.

Here, however, emerged the most dramatic discontinuity between the print-based practices that characterized much of the literacy work at DUSTY and Taj's own predilections. When the time came for Taj to record his voice, he performed his story, without even glancing at his neatly segmented word-processed text. Table 4 (next page) juxtaposes a portion of Taj's written and performed text. Taj's performance followed the plotline, but dramatized it: as he took on the voices of his characters, he transformed a third-person omniscient narration ("A scientist found him lying on the ground.") to a first-person enactment ("Oooh, I found a boy lying on the ground.") Remarkably, Taj performed the text from memory, having internalized the precise timing for each frame of his movie and its plot.<sup>6</sup> Below is Taj's matter-of-fact account of what seemed to his instructor quite a creative architectural feat.<sup>7</sup>

- |       |   |
|-------|---|
| Nora: | When you wrote "Delicate Man," you wrote it down and it was really like you had everything word for word, but when you went into the voice capture with Ms. E you did kind of a different version, right? You didn't just read off the paper. |
| Taj:  | Uhhh... no, I just said it.   |
| Nora: | So you already had it memorized in your head, right?  |
| Taj:  | Yeah, how long the movie was and how and what timing the voices would be and ==   |
| Nora: | == Wow, so you remembered all that so when you were saying the voice capture ==   |
| Taj:  | == I just remembered how many minutes, what scenes in the movie took place.   |
| Nora: | Wow, and so you did the voice capture with each scene that you knew was coming up and you knew how long each scene was? Yeah?   |
| Taj:  | Mmm hmmm.   |
| Nora: | Wow, Taj, that's amazing.   |

As a child at home in the digital age, and as a composer for whom the use of multiple modalities was nor-

TABLE 4. DELICATE MAN WRITTEN TEXT VS. VOICE CAPTURE (EXCERPT)

Original Text	Voice Capture
Delicate Man is a boy and a thousand people threw dodge-balls at him. Each person had two dodge-balls.	Hey, why do you guys have dodge balls?
	We want to throw it at you. Oh no! Uuuh!
A scientist found him lying on the ground.	Ooh, I found a boy on the ground!
He picked him up and then he took him to the lab and examined him. He accidentally dropped him into a smoosher and mutating machine and that's how he turned into Delicate Man.	Maybe I should take him to my lab.  Oh no I [...] made him fall into the mutating machine.
The boy found out that he had no arms just legs. His legs fell off. The scientist put him back together. He's a super hero. His only power is that he breaks into pieces. He has big legs so he runs fast. It was hard being Delicate Man. If somebody bumped into him they put him back together [until the scientist found him on the ground.]	Heeey, I broke into pieces!  I'll put you back together.  Oops, sorry. Did I break you into pieces? Oh no, you didn't. Well, I'm not putting you back together. hah hah Hey! Let me put you back together. [long transition] Aahhh, there's a robber!
Soon a bad guy walks down the street [and Delicate Man hits the bad guy with his big legs.] The robber has a dagger and he swings it around.	Run!  Aaahh! Gonna slice you!
Delicate Man falls into bits and pretends to be sliced.	[groaning noise from DM] Hey, look behind you!
Delicate Man ambushes the robber.	Yaaah!

mal rather than extraordinary, Taj's preferred process of representation privileged a seamless integration of visual, musical, linguistic, and technical elements. Indeed, his original creation of the character of Delicate Man was itself multimodal, drawing on and combining a range of symbol systems, modes, and textual resources, as revealed in the following interview excerpt:

Miss Nora: So tell me about Delicate Man, how did, when did you think of Delicate Man?  
Taj: Uhh, in the first grade.

Nora: And why did you pick the name "Delicate Man"?  
Taj: Huh?  
Nora: Why is his name "Delicate Man"?  
Taj: I made it out of Tinker Toys...  
Nora: ...OOOh  
Taj: and I made it while I was near a piece of china.  
Nora: Oh, so that's how you got the idea for the word "delicate"?  
Taj: Yes.  
Nora: What do you think "delicate" means, that word?  
Taj: Easy to break.  
Nora: Oh, so when you...made Delicate Man...was there another superhero that he...reminds you of or is he totally different or...  
Taj: ...Umm, No, he actually looks like the guy in The Odyssey,  
Nora: Which odyssey?  
Taj: The story.  
Nora: Oh, The Odyssey?  
Taj: Mmm hmmm.  
Nora: Oh, because he has one eye?  
Taj: Yes.

It is especially interesting that Taj reported that he originally created a stick figure of Delicate Man out of Tinker Toys—a resource that offered particular compositional constraints, such as long thin legs!—and that he later went on to translate this material stick figure into linguistic and digital multimodal form. Taj willingly wove for us a set of semantic influences—textual, material, aesthetic, and generic—that differ radically from the often more unimodal process of composing a linguistic text.

At DUSTY, Taj was able to turn the available technological means to serve his preferred creative predilections. The flexibility of an out-of-school summer program fostered this kind of appropriation. By fashioning a digital, multimodal animation featuring his previously created character of Delicate Man, Taj created a representation of his social world that was agentic in helpful ways; it allowed him to give voice to possible identities and try on possible selves. It will not have escaped readers' notice that, in his digital story, Taj recontextualized his regrettable experiences



of being pelted with dodge balls. The real Taj was routinely unable to turn the tables on the more athletic boys, but Delicate Man gained his magical powers by being hit by not one but a thousand dodge balls and then being accidentally mutated. To create a plot in which one becomes a superhero is an important authorial move. Even more interesting is the nature of this superhero. Many children adopt superheroes from cartoons and comic books to recreate their exploits digitally. It's more unusual, in our experience, for children to create their own superhero character, borrowing expertly from the genre by offering, for example, a creation story. Taj knew exactly what features of Delicate Man were unique. "He's one of a kind," commented Taj's DUSTY instructor. "Cept for him getting mutated. That's not original," replied Taj, the honest author. It is especially unusual for a child to craft a superhero who goes against the masculine grain. There is some precedent, to be sure, for characters

To create a plot in which one becomes a superhero is an important authorial move.

who are less than traditionally masculine: Think of Clark Kent of Superman fame. Usually, however, once the mild-mannered characters transform into superheroes, their powers become formidable: Superman's ability to leap tall buildings with a single bound, for example. Yet Taj created a vulnerable superhero, one with the less-than-spectacular power of falling apart. This, we believe, was in keeping with his sensitivity to himself and certain friends and relatives as different, not so athletic, and sometimes picked-on. "Mostly everybody's out to get him," Taj noted about Delicate Man, "cause he's weird." Taj's mom mentioned to us in an e-mail that sometimes Taj gets labeled as "weird" too, particularly by same-age friends and cousins who "are striving to be African American hip-hop



cool...athletic” and who consequently don’t know what to make of Taj, with his mixed-race heritage and his unconventional version of a masculine self that is vulnerable rather than tough.

**A good day at school: “Nobody getting beat up and teachers wouldn’t get so mad.”**

The beginning of Taj’s summer at DUSTY was filled with altercations. During one especially bad incident, Taj and the two brothers, Brandon and Jermaine, sat around a table and kicked each other, accidentally and otherwise. This horseplay eventually degenerated into

It would be a grave analytic mistake to dismiss Taj as merely different, as an interesting outlier. We see him as different in degree, not in kind. In his extremity, he calls our attention in helpful ways to the dilemmas, challenges, and resources of young boys coming of age in a digital era.

boasts and threats. “I’m gonna come by and shoot up your house,” Brandon told Taj, apparently in an attempt to one-up Taj’s somewhat milder previous promise that he’d have his friends—who “have very bad tempers”—pay Brandon and Jermaine a visit. Over the course of the summer, however, we saw evidence that Taj was learning to be more social and less self-focused, even on the dodge-ball court. Late in the summer one tutor noted:

On the dodge-ball court, everyone, even Ms. Nora... is playing. The girls are just as active as the boys, although among the boys Taj and Miguel seem less dominant.... Clinton gets smacked by one of the balls and sits off on the side and complains to the teacher. Taj looks frustrated at getting hit a few times, but unlike before, makes little of it and plays along.

We also observed that Taj had started to gain in social stature with the other children, a transformation that we attribute in part to the growing respect he was garnering for his digital work. His DUSTY instructors and tutors praised his story with genuine enthusiasm

at every turn and took obvious pride in what he had accomplished. Digital expertise was something the students, including the popular athletic boys, valued too. Each, after all, was a willing participant in a summer digital storytelling program, where cool kids could also be computer experts, and computer nerds could also be cool kids. Taj’s mastery of the superhero genre, popular especially among the boys, also likely brought him a bit of cachet. By the end of the summer, Taj had gained entry into the previously closed social group of popular African-American boys. Most noticeably, Jermaine relented in his previously staunch opposition toward Taj. After a culminating daylong field trip to the university, Taj’s DUSTY instructor noted with some surprise that “Jermaine and Taj were like best friends,” and that Taj even bought a soda for Jermaine—a gesture, however, that Taj later professed not to remember.

When Taj returned to school after DUSTY, he had a difficult fourth-grade year: He did not get along with his teacher, felt oppressed in her classroom, and generally experienced a grave mismatch between his love of computers and need for movement on the one hand and, on the other, a school environment where “we rarely do computers” and a premium was placed on order and staying in one’s seat. A good day at school, Taj said, would be one in which no one gets beat up and teachers don’t get so mad. Although resource specialists at Taj’s school had conducted numerous tests to determine the cause of his disruptive classroom behavior and his difficulties with fine motor movement, his mother, exasperated by evidence that the school was not complying with his Individualized Education Program, began to search for other schools and even considered home-schooling. She was clear that many children, including Taj, “have different needs, postures, attitudes, ways of processing information and ways of learning than do the children for whom this present educational system was designed,” and she worried about schools’ effects on “our African-American children and other children of color—particularly the boys.” She was determined that her son would not be a casualty. Outside of school, Taj continued to flourish in his technologically mediated world, gaining more and more expertise at animation and thriving on his acquisition of insider knowledge about software, hardware, and an amazing array of other topics. He showed *Delicate Man* at a local film festival, accepting kudos and questions from the audience with panache.

Of the focal children we studied for this paper, Taj was the most proficient technologically and among the least proficient socially. In addition, he was among the children who were least happy at school, one of those children who presented the greatest dilemmas for many of their school-day teachers. He defied racial and gender stereotypes, not identifying in any obvious way with African-American youth culture or hegemonic forms of masculinity. Despite his great facility with and interest in technology, he was at risk of school failure. The multimodal literacies that gave him social purchase and allowed him agentive expression out of school did not always have noticeable value during the school day. We appreciate the chance to write about Taj precisely because he complicated many of the expectations about boys that prevail in the literature. Analyzing his creative work and his participation at DUSTY gave us a roadmap for thinking about the other boys in our study. It would be a grave analytic mistake to dismiss Taj as merely different, as an interesting outlier. We see him as different in degree, not in kind. In his extremity, he calls our attention in helpful ways to the dilemmas, challenges, and resources of young boys coming of age in a digital era.

While we did not expect all children to take up the available technological means with as much eagerness and ease as Taj, we were primed by his example to examine exactly how their multimodal composing interacted with their expressive intentions, desires, and resources, including their knowledge about print-based composing and local and popular culture. We were interested, as well, in the representations of self that these boys constructed through multimodal means. While we did not expect that all the boys would draw so transparently on their daily lives to fashion themselves as superheroes, Taj's case reminded us to be alert to the multiple possibilities for self-fashioning embedded in storytelling.

We have demonstrated how Taj achieved greater social acceptance and increased sociability through his growing technological achievements in a particular kind of social space. We turn now, albeit more briefly, to the other boys in our study, asking how their participation at DUSTY and their experiences of an urban boyhood both complemented and extended what we learned from Taj.

## **MANY VERSIONS OF MASCULINE**

In the urban neighborhood where DUSTY had its home, African-American men of all ages could be seen

gathering on street corners, especially by the mini-mart and the liquor store, greeting their friends in the cars that cruised past with stereos blasting hip-hop and rhythm and blues. Jobs were not plentiful, so people had time on their hands. Gun shots were heard with unsettling frequency, sometimes heralding a murder or drive-by shooting; police helicopters swooped low and hovered in the evening; social service billboards offered advice to families with relatives in prison. Poverty was apparent in this neighborhood, not only because of vacant lots and run-down houses on the streets, but also because of the green hills dotted with multimillion dollar homes just a few miles away. Obviously, the children who lived in the area were aware of their neighborhood. "This neighborhood is bad," announced Jamal at the end of a digital story that featured, among other sensory details, the smell of urine and the sight of drug deals. Another child asked a university tutor somewhat incredulously, "Do you really think kids in this neighborhood will go to college?" Less obvious, however, is how the boys negotiated their urban environment, and the models of masculinity offered there and in the media, in order to construct images of the young men they hoped to become.

Simply by virtue of their participation at DUSTY, these boys and their parents had already countered many prevalent stereotypes about urban boys of color: that they are at the mercy of the lure of the streets, that things requiring intellectual effort don't engage them, that they are—to recall Ferguson's (2001) findings about the prevalent views of African-American boys shared even by their teachers—criminals in the making. Noguera (2003) asked, in the context of his examination of the educational dilemmas facing African-American males, why educators so often assume that these youth are able to make raps but not to debate. Merely to observe the boys at DUSTY, to see their attention riveted on computer screens as they engaged in digital, literacy-intense work, was to understand that they were enacting identities that encompassed a wider range of subject positions than is customarily assumed for boys like them.

An examination of each of the boys' digital stories, particularly with an eye toward determining the types of masculine roles depicted in them, demonstrated a range of positive, agentive senses of self that indexed, or were linked to, the boys themselves, the stories' male characters, or both. Clearly the boys had not been overwhelmed by the preponderance of negative

Clearly the boys had not been overwhelmed by the preponderance of negative male images they encountered in their neighborhoods or the media. Their male protagonists were able to take part in and influence events, assume responsibility for the care of others, look toward the future, make judgments, control their actions, and acknowledge their fears.

male images they encountered in their neighborhoods or the media. Their male protagonists were able to take part in and influence events, assume responsibility for the care of others, look toward the future, make judgments, control their actions, and acknowledge their fears. Jamal created a digital sense poem about his neighborhood in which he was readily able to point out its problems.<sup>8</sup> However, he also took note of its sensory delights. Thus, skidding cars, “a brotha selling drugs,” and the “smell of urine” were juxtaposed with warm breezes, the sound of the ice cream truck, and the taste of “cinnamony sugary churro.” His portrayal suggested a wise and judicious narrator, able both to acknowledge his neighborhood’s geographic dangers and socioeconomic inequities, and simultaneously to celebrate its positive cultural and communal features, a point of view and stance toward the world, we might add, that we saw in Jamal himself.

André created a first-person narrative that detailed his early life as an abandoned and sickly baby who was adopted by his cousin: “When I was born I was sickly,” he began his story. “When my mom was pregnant with me, she was taking drugs.” Admitting to having been a low-birth-weight baby who still needed to take vitamins and to battle a tendency to be “hyper,” André also noted that now, “I’m doing good in school, I have friends, I listen to my teachers, and I make good grades.” Finally, he advised his viewers that despite the negatives in his life, he knew that God had blessed him “with a wonderful mother and a good heart.” Our field notes led us to believe that André was not always as sanguine about the challenging ups and downs of his life as his digital narrator would have his viewers believe. For example, one tutor noted that he expressed a great deal of anger toward both his biological mom and his foster mom, feeling they had

each failed him in different ways. Nonetheless, the script André eventually created emphasized the happy and grateful boy that he wanted to be, and perhaps that others wanted for him. This, of course, is a function of autobiographical narrative—to construct past events in ways that reflect present sensibilities and desired future selves.

A few of the boys’ plot lines rather unreflectively embraced traditional male roles or gender relations. Patrick’s recounting of his fishing trip divided activities between those assigned to men and boys, who took dangerous boat rides and caught bluegills and large-mouthed bass, and those assigned to his mother and other women, who cooked the fish at home and at restaurants. Indeed, many of the boys chose characters and heroes who possessed what are usually considered typical masculine characteristics and predilections: bravery, power, independence, the will and the ability to rise to every challenge. Even Taj’s vulnerable one-eyed superhero was able to win the day by relying on the unusual physical prowess of having his legs fall off. However, we did not have to look far in order to identify assemblages of self that also incorporated distinctively non-traditional male activities and roles. André celebrated a pastime in his digital story, as well as in his social life at DUSTY, that is, as Kelley (1997) pointed out, usually identified with girls: double-dutch jump rope. Leon, who struggled perhaps more than any of the other boys to find an intellectual and social path at DUSTY, demonstrated in his digital movie the satisfaction he felt at his newfound ability to follow the rules—not a value often associated with a boisterous boy or with hegemonic forms of masculinity. Likewise, James carefully presented himself as a domestic peacekeeper and caretaker to his pets. As we triangulated boys’ stories, their plotlines, and their protagonists with insights gleaned from interviews and observations at DUSTY and from knowledge of the children’s schools, homes, and community, we began to see that both the movies and the boys’ senses of themselves often incorporated many different versions of masculinity. In some cases this analysis revealed tensions between normative expectations of manliness and the boys’ own experiences as boys, as in the case of Clinton.

Clinton, a nine-year-old honor student, was the pride and the hope of a single-parent family living on an economic razor’s edge, a family in frequent danger of losing its apartment and under constant threat of going hungry. An important family rule was for

Clinton to be in the house by the time the streetlights came on, for fear of robbers and child-snatchers. He planned to be an engineer; he was perhaps the politest child in all of DUSTY, as field note after field note attested. Clinton was very successful in school; he won essay contests and was selected as his school's representative for official trips. He was the sort of student who would write five sets of descriptive details when asked for one, and throw in an added bonus of illustrations for each; this was an actual event recorded by a DUSTY tutor. He noted with pride: "I love to learn, and the Lord blessed me to do this." In fact he often called upon the Lord, repeating the phrasings of his mother as well as the cartoon character Bart Simpson, sometimes to humorous effect. For example, at a pivotal moment in his digital story, the Lord appears, saying "Ay, caramba!"

Clinton's digital story recounted a rip-roaring road trip to Reno, Nevada, starring Clinton, the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles of movie and television fame, and their nemesis, Shredder. Titled *My Ninja Turtle Problem*, the story combined memories of a dream Clinton had had with elements of his favorite television show; the story's climax was Clinton's transformation into a crime-fighting mutant Ninja turtle. In an early crucial scene, as Clinton ate his dinner at a casino restaurant, Shredder attempted to cast a spell on him, intending to change Clinton into a vicious "pit bull and bad guy all mixed" who would aid Shredder in getting rid of the turtles. As Shredder snuck up to the dinner table, the ever-alert Clinton turned his head and startled Shredder, who accidentally poured the wrong spell into Clinton's turtle soup. Shredder slipped away undetected, but the next morning Clinton awakened, terrified, to find that he had begun to morph into a mutant Ninja turtle. Initially, Clinton desperately resisted the spell, hiding under the bedcovers lest his Ninja turtle companions discover his mutating identity. Eventually, however, he overcame his fear, ripped off the clothes that had disguised his turtle-ness, and began to delight in his newfound strength and the interesting ability to alternate identities at will: "'Piece-a' cake,' I said as I spread my arms out. Then, I magically turned back into a boy. I spread my arms out again and said, 'Like I said, Piece-a' cake.' Magically, I went from a boy to a Ninja turtle: boy turtle, boy turtle, boy turtle, boy turtle. 'You have the power,' Mike [Michaelangelo, one of the Ninja] said."

On first analysis, we considered Clinton's story to be a typical action-studded adventure, perhaps some-

what unusually narrated with its references to the Lord, but well within the genre of the cartoon-inspired action stories that have such great appeal for boys. However, during a retrospective interview in which we watched his digital story with him, Clinton drew interesting connections between his narrator's behavior in the movie and his own life, leading us to consider how this story was intertwined with his own identity formation. For example, Clinton compared his character's reluctance to reveal his Ninja turtle identity with his own daily struggles to present an image of himself that stood apart from that of many other boys in his neigh-

**We began to see that both the movies and the boys' senses of themselves often incorporated many different versions of masculinity.**

borhood and school. When he discussed his transformation into a Ninja turtle, he explained that, in the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle cartoon, if the turtles revealed themselves in public, "All around a lot of people...are gonna try to get rid of them," partially because they're "afraid that people will react badly when they see that they're different." Presumably, the turtles also hesitated to reveal their identities because, in their fight against crime, they had established themselves as "good guys" and, therefore, could fall prey to "bad guy" enemies. Similarly, when Clinton wore his "church clothes" on the first day of school, an event he considered to be a special occasion, he reported that he was "scared people were gonna tease" him—not only because he chose to wear dress slacks and a button-up long-sleeved shirt, but also because he had outgrown his pants. In the end, like his Ninja turtle self, Clinton summoned the courage to assume his authentic identity: that of a student who was "proud of going back to school" and who, despite his fears that people were going to tease him, decided that he didn't care because he just wanted to "look nice." Clinton considered himself to be strong and his peers weak because they betrayed what he called "inner feelings"—their authentic identities—when they surrendered to the pressure to enact hegemonic masculine roles. Like his movie's Ninja turtle self, who ultimately sheds his disguise to embrace his true identity, Clinton felt that wearing nice clothes showed his "power," reflecting his "inner feelings" and not "outer feelings" that misrepresented his true nature.



Prompted to discuss why other students preferred not to wear more formal attire on their first day of school, Clinton attempted to explain the informal dress code of the students at his school and asked the interviewer whether she knew the term *pimp*. Although it was unclear from the conversation whether Clinton understood the definition of *pimp* as a man who profits from prostitution, it was definitely clear that he considered *pimp* to be a negative term and a role he wanted to avoid. For Clinton, *pimp* carried connotations of dressing poorly and disrespectfully, if not flamboyantly. He explained that perhaps the other students thought, “Oh, I don’t need to wear these nice [clothes], I don’t need to wear this. It’s gonna make me look too geeky and stuff.” According to Clinton, those students succumbed to the pressure to present themselves as pimps: tough men standing on corners or walking down streets accompanied by other pimps and, notably, their menacing pit bull sidekicks. Clinton further described pimps as those who “have no job and they talk about people and call people

The boys of color in DUSTY enacted various versions of masculinity, identities that challenge stereotypical notions, both academic and popular, of who such boys are and can be.

names.” Whereas Clinton prided himself in having been recognized as “the most intelligent and smartest by all the students” in his class, he felt that, should he surrender to the expectation to emulate a pimp, he would feel as if he were “losing [his] knowledge.” For Clinton, the desire to succeed, and thereby to help his family and community, far outweighed any urges to fit in with his peers. When asked for his views on how to make positive changes in his neighborhood, he returned to the negative masculine identity he wanted to avoid. He argued that if kids focused on becoming smarter, they probably wouldn’t become pimps, but would be likelier to get better jobs and to earn money for much-needed housing and transportation.

At the DUSTY community film screening where *My Ninja Turtle Problem* was shown, Clinton arrived wearing khaki slacks, a dress shirt, a tie, and a navy suit jacket; his peers mostly wore jeans and oversized sweatshirts with the hoods up. Unlike some of the other young filmmakers, who sat rather shyly and

sheepishly on stage, Clinton seemed very much at ease in front of the audience and video camera. As he watched a video clip of himself taking questions from the audience, he described his appearance this way:

Okay, I’m...pointing out to the people...From the image that it is there, my head’s still talking to the people. I’m on the stage and I’m pointing, I’m pointin’ like at the sky, like at God, kinda like saying the Pledge, the Pledge of Allegiance, but not with the hand on the heart, the finger in the sky, like “We all stand as one!” And I look like a president because, uh, my portrait and my hair cut. I am in a suit.

We like this image: Clinton pointing to the sky and proclaiming unity, like a president! That this is not the usual image of an African-American boy is precisely our point. The boys of color in DUSTY enacted various versions of masculinity, identities that challenge stereotypical notions, both academic and popular, of who such boys are and can be.

## TECHNOLOGY, MULTIMODALITY, AND LITERACY

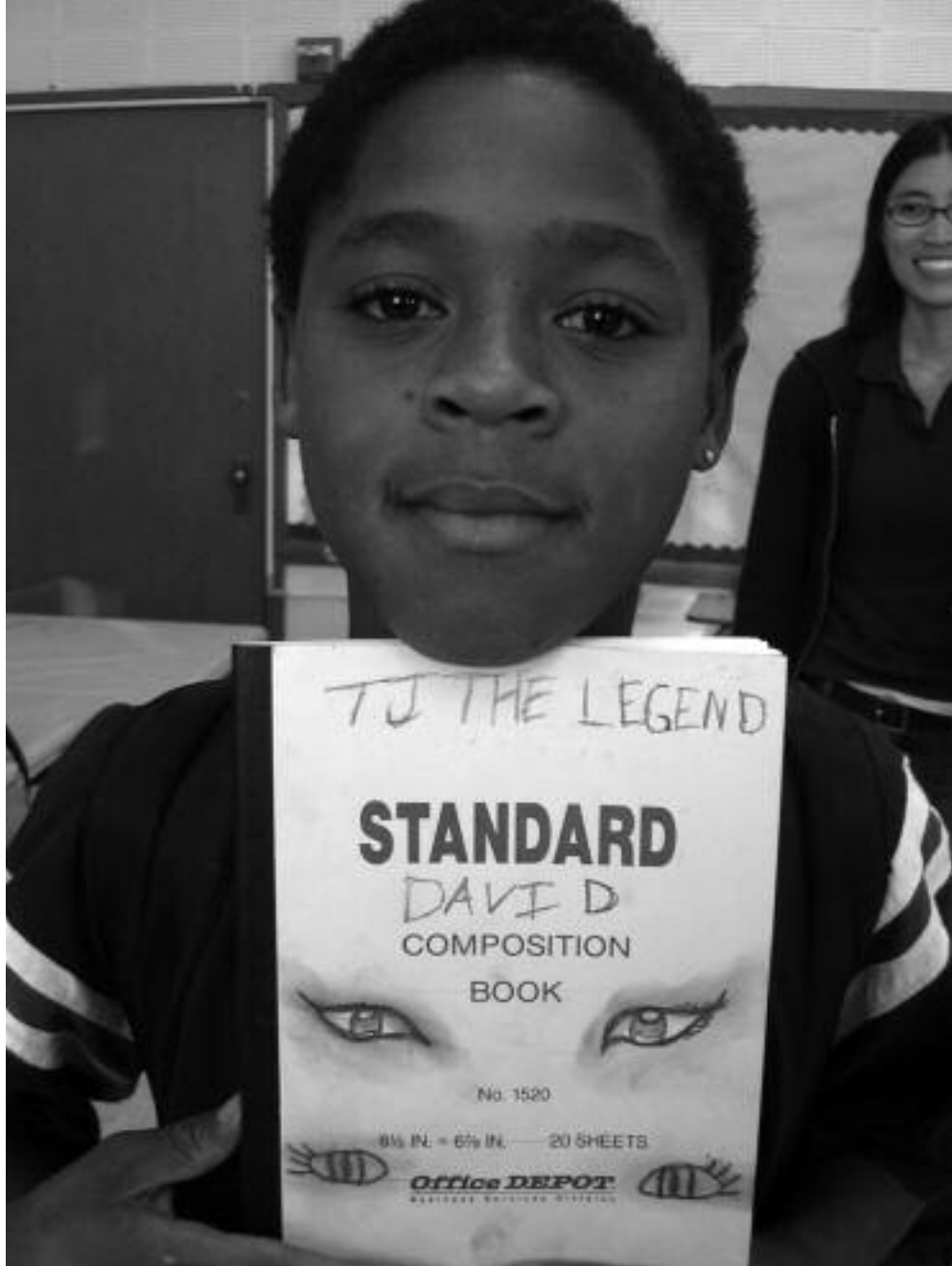
Not all afterschool programs use computers, and certainly most are not as technology-intensive as DUSTY. Given scarce resources, it makes sense to inquire what advantages accrue from such an investment. A related issue, one that has not been addressed by any research we know of, is the relationship between multimodal composing—which might begin with a printed text but quickly proceeds beyond it—and traditional writing and literacy. As we demonstrated, though writing by hand was a chore for Taj, he was expert at exploiting multimodality, braiding together his words, images, and music.

Taj was not, however, the only successful multimodal composer at DUSTY. All the boys in this study completed a digital story; some created more than one. Jamal, who attended DUSTY for two summers, made his first story, a history of Black cowboys, when he was eight years old, and his second, the soulful and somewhat melancholy reflection on his neighborhood introduced above, when he was nine. Manuel, whose family had recently immigrated from Mexico and who came to DUSTY while he was learning English, created three stories over as many semesters: the first based on a Mexican folk tale, the second a salute to his dad, and the third a recreation of X-Men characters and plotlines. He planned but didn’t finish a fourth, an

exploration of black holes. Though boys, especially boys of color, are often characterized by mass media and in academic literature as being disengaged from literacy, these children were able to deploy sophisticated state-of-the-art software for their own expressive intents and to complete creative projects that were admired by teachers, tutors, friends, and family.

As can be seen in Table 1, the boys created their digital stories on a variety of topics, which they chose themselves: growing up as a sickly baby, pit bulls and fishing trips, school versus afterschool, and a whole host of popular culture-inspired adventures or commentaries. We attribute a significant part of the boys' engagement in the involved, often tedious work of multimedia composition to their investment in their self-generated topics. A great deal of the literature on boys and literacy has debated the merits and demerits of allowing boys to write, in school, about the sometimes off-putting topics that engage them: bodily humor, irony, blood, and gore. For us, there is no debate about this freedom after school. We have seen that allowing children to choose their topics and control their creative production can do much to secure their voluntary participation in literacy-rich multimodal activities.

Patrick, a Cambodian-American child who was new in the neighborhood, was just finding his way socially among the largely African-American DUSTY group. For example, he once corrected another student who used the term Black, saying African American was what people preferred; he always used the term African American when referring to other children at DUSTY. The choice of music for his digital story on fishing helped Patrick gain a measure of social purchase among his new peers. Music selection was one of the most sociable, informal parts of the digital story process. Most of the DUSTY children selected their music at approximately the same time, so that, at any given moment, one or more selections were playing while the children shouted out the names of songs or singers, affirming or decrying each other's taste in music. Patrick's tutors encouraged him to select music that they felt aug-



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mented the message of his movie and created cohesion across the modalities. Patrick, however, had other authorial intentions, and asserted his musical preferences, as the following field note documents:

Jake [undergraduate tutor, Asian male] suggested: "Weezer Go Fishing." Patrick said he didn't know

that song. Jake said it was with the Muppets. Patrick said he wanted Lil Bow Wow [an African-American rapper especially popular with the younger set]. Patrick asked if “Weezer Go Fishing” was rock and roll, and Jake answered “yes.” Patrick said, “I hate rock and roll. I HATE it.” . . . First Sarah [undergraduate tutor, Asian female] and Patrick locate “Weezer Go Fishing.” But as Patrick repeats for the tenth time, “I hate rock and roll. I HATE IT!” they decide not to download it after all. Jake just thought the title and theme were appropriate, but Patrick wanted something very different. . . . Patrick said he wanted Lil Bow Wow, but then saw a few listings for Usher [African-American rapper whose themes are sophisticated and sexually explicit]. Sarah clicked on “I Need a Girl,” and Patrick bobbed his head to the beat. He said, “He sound like my uncle.” His head bobbed some more. They went back and forth between a few Usher songs and then picked “I Need a Girl.”

Patrick’s choice was rewarded a few days later when his movie was played. According to our field notes, the moment Patrick’s music came on, the other children cried out, “I like that song!” Patrick smiled, obviously pleased that he had chosen cool music for his movie, and perhaps feeling a bit more socially aligned with the African-American children in the room.

Children knew from the outset that their stories would have an important visual component—that they would, in effect, be movies. Thus it is not surprising that their topics themselves afforded visual representations. It is, after all, hard to imagine a narrative about the green, scaly half-boy, half-turtle Ninja characters that does not provide images of those extraordinary creatures, especially since they originated in cartoons and comic books. We suggest, then, that another engaging aspect of multimodality for these boys was the chance to dip into the vast reservoir of images on the Internet in order to authentically illustrate narratives that drew on popular culture. Malcolm, whose story was an introduction to *The Boondocks* comic strip, could find actual pictures of the characters for his digital composition, and Manuel could find frames of the X-Men to download for his movie. However, even children who focused on themes derived from local rather than popular culture seemed enthusiastic about the potential to represent

their ideas visually as well as linguistically. They were diligent about finding exactly the right image to carry out their expressive intent, and they were often ingenious in adapting images, not only recontextualizing them, but also physically altering them for their own purposes.

Our field notes revealed Patrick’s deep interest in and knowledge about fishing, a link to his culture in Cambodia—a country he could locate easily on a world map—and to family-based, and especially male, activities. His narration detailed a fishing trip with his dad and his uncles, in which the family party caught a hundred bluegills and a huge largemouth bass. His story emphasized the danger, speed, and fear he experienced on this all-male excursion: “My boat jumped in the air five time because the wave from the other boat made a jump. I was scared that I might fall out of the boat but I weared a life vest so I would not drown and die.” In addition to the pictures he brought from home, he carefully weeded through a wide selection of fish pictures on the Internet to make sure that the image would best display his expertise and the species of fish he was discussing. While looking for photos of largemouth bass, Patrick, according to our field notes, “scrolled through dozens of them and picked out one to enlarge and look at. He decided it looked ‘fake, not real’ and chose another one that was silver, like the one he caught.” On another occasion Patrick found a striking photograph of a six-foot sturgeon being held up by a line of white fishermen. When he imported the photo into his digital story, Patrick carefully cropped the heads and legs of the white fishermen to zoom in on the huge sturgeon. Since Patrick’s story was about his fishing trip with his Cambodian father and uncle, he felt that the image of white fishermen detracted from the story.<sup>9</sup> Most of the boys similarly searched to find exactly the right representation or altered images to make them appropriate for their stories.

The boys’ projects illustrated several conceptions of multimodal composing. Some young authors, like Taj, braided the modes together, matching words with images and music and creating an aesthetic whole that was greater than the sum of its parts. Jamal’s story fell into this category as well. His slow-paced and thoughtful poem grew from a writing assignment with the prompts “I see, I smell, I hear, I feel, I taste, I know.” To a series of images illustrating what he experienced in his neighborhood, Jamal added a melancholy tune from Miles Davis’s album *Sketches of Spain*. We noted that the boys often had a sense of

authorial multimodal design as they orchestrated the various modes, even though the design was not always apparent to the adults around them. Manuel's first digital story, *The Mountain of the Devil*, was based on Mexican folklore he had heard from his grandparents; it included elements of murder and ascendance to heaven. For background music, he brought a Chinese music CD, which baffled his instructor. When she asked whether he understood the lyrics, Manuel replied that he did not, but that he wanted to use the music anyway because "it makes me happy" and because it was a gift from his dad. Further, Manuel revealed that he intended to use this peaceful-sounding music only at the beginning and end of his story, and that he would use different musical traditions for the sad middle portion.<sup>10</sup>

Other children seemed to conceptualize each mode as bearing separate meaning, as did Patrick. Patrick's storyline celebrated his cultural and familial tradition of fishing, but he apparently chose his music on the basis of affiliations he was beginning to build with his African-American friends. Furthermore, he used images not only to illustrate and reinforce the themes of his narrative, but also to introduce elements that his verbal narrative did not readily allow. In the middle of creating his story about his fishing trip, which centered on catching bluegill and largemouth bass, Patrick decided he'd rather write about sturgeons. When he couldn't figure out a way to introduce sturgeons into the storyline of his actual fishing trip, he elected to include pictures of them at the end of the story anyway. To the viewer who knows fish, Patrick's sturgeon pictures may appear unconnected with the rest of his story. Yet we recognize that their placement was driven by a young author's recognition that, in a multimodal text, one can reveal more than in a unimodal one. Among these young authors, multiple modes could function in concert, being braided together; they could function independently, conveying separate layers of meaning and multiple messages; and they could relay specialized meanings.

Finally, different modalities provided different entryways for some boys into the creative process. Most children followed the curricular path laid out in DUSTY, in which a variety of writing activities on paper led to a handwritten, then a word-processed story that eventually went through a set of prescribed steps in order to become a movie. Thus, by starting with linguistic narratives that were often shared orally but were always written as well, children built on tra-

ditional print-based and school-based literacy practices. Alternatively, Taj, who had physical difficulty with writing by hand, dictated his third-person narrative, only to transform it into a dramatized first-person account. Once boys who, like Taj, found writing difficult had someone to whom they could dictate their stories, they could fly in terms of giving life to their creative intent. The same was not true of all children, some of whom not only struggled with the linear, print-led nature of the DUSTY digital storytelling

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process but also found it difficult to conceptualize and articulate a story at all. Leon was one such student. As one of the DUSTY coordinators recalled in something of an understatement, "Trying to get Leon to develop a story on paper proved unfruitful...even with one-on-one assistance, he just couldn't produce and organize ideas that way, in the abstract."

A compositional turning point for Leon came at the intersection of embodied movement, image, and genre. Because Leon was a very physical kid who needed to burn off energy, he was fond of DUSTY's backyard, where he was regularly sent, not just for exercise but also to regroup and regain his focus. According to his DUSTY instructor, "Outside was where you went when you weren't focusing but you weren't in trouble yet." In addition, DUSTY instructors often lent cameras to students, urging them to take their own photos for their stories rather than just mining the Internet. Thus, when Leon could not come up with an idea for a story or put any words on paper, his instructor, in a stroke of pedagogical brilliance, paired images with Leon's love of outdoor space and his need for physical release:

Leon's digital story, *How DUSTY Changed My Life*, evolved not from a written story script, as was the





standard, but rather from a series of digital photos he took...We decided to just give him a camera, send him out the back door into the yard, and let him snap away. He shot about 35 images I guess, and in the process of doing that he came to the idea of doing a story about how DUSTY changed his life, using all of those images of different views of the DUSTY physical space.

Leon photographed the fence and the ground and the trees and the sky, capturing images that did not at first glance seem relevant to his topic—that is, until one remembers how outdoor space and freedom of movement were a quintessential part of the DUSTY experience for him. They were the seeds, as we will relate later on, of his positive reorientation of himself as a student and socially responsible peer. However, the images alone were still not enough to position Leon as a storyteller. That final transformation came

through a different modality and genre. One of his tutors asked Leon to imagine himself on the *Oprah* television show, with a microphone in front of him and millions of people awaiting his interview. Within this popular-cultural frame, Leon happily allowed himself to be interviewed. In a flash, he had understood what making a digital story was all about and could then proceed with the rest of the process.

### **DUSTY AS A SOCIAL SPACE BETWEEN SCHOOL AND FUN**

In seven of the nine boys in this study, we observed social and academic growth that we attribute in substantial part to their participation at DUSTY. While Clinton and Jamal each created terrific stories and fully participated in DUSTY's activities, they were already, in our estimation, well on their way to school success before they attended the summer program; they had already begun to build identities that allowed

them to enact agentive, non-hegemonic senses of self as responsible young men. In Jamal's case, the loving and careful attention of two parents, a strong elementary school, and his unusually reflective nature pointed the way, while Clinton had the devotion of his single mom, the support of his church community, and his own remarkable sense of responsibility. In the remaining seven students, we observed important social and academic growth over the course of their tenure at DUSTY. We believe this growth was intimately connected to their participation in a social space that provided access to particular kinds of participant structures, relationships, and symbolic resources.

This last section characterizes further the types of growth we observed, highlighting some important features of this out-of-school program that seemed to foster the boys' development. We focus on three significant ways DUSTY was configured as a productive learning space, each having to do with foregrounding for the boys a sense of agency in terms of their identities and their creative work.

- **Freedom from school identities.** Because DUSTY was physically and institutionally separate from school, it allowed the boys a certain socio-historical freedom from their school-based biographies and the identity expectations that had followed them through at least four years of schooling.
- **Freedom to choose.** Children were encouraged to write and create digital movies about any topic they desired, which positioned them to draw on popular cultural resources, local knowledge and values, and their own struggles as young men in the process of what Bakhtin (1981) might term a socio-historical becoming.
- **Freedom to move.** The DUSTY space allowed the boys the freedom to move—to walk around, go outside, go upstairs—if not at will, at least to a much greater degree than at school. In some cases, this opportunity embodied social, intellectual, and creative agency, as the boys understood that they could participate in DUSTY differently than in school and other educational institutions.

### Freedom from School Identities

At the time of our study, DUSTY operated in a community center across the street from an elementary school and a middle school. Thus, it represented not only a space that was physically distinct from school, but also, we would argue, an alternative social space where students could be different kinds of people:

escaping, discarding, or altering the identities that they enacted (or with which they were associated) during the school day. Many afterschool programs in the U.S., especially those for elementary and middle school children, operate in the same physical plant that children attend during the school day, with good reason. Such an arrangement takes advantage of existing material resources and can provide a safe and seamless transition from school to afterschool. But therein may lie a problem for some children, and so it would have been for James. James came to DUSTY late one fall semester, joining two other students from his fifth-grade class. With only three weeks remaining in the program, his DUSTY instructor explained to his mother that he would not likely be able to complete a movie, which was normally a 10-week project. However, with quiet determination James managed to finish one of the more polished stories of the class, a straightforward telling of an important football game. As one tutor noted, "He practically taught himself to use Adobe Premiere," and "his choices were deliberate and thoughtful; he knew and could articulate what image should go where...and most impressively, why." James thus quickly impressed the DUSTY staff with his ability to work efficiently, insightfully, and independently.

After the winter break, James returned for another semester, and DUSTY was treated to another side of him, that of junior tutor. In this role James excelled, as a tutor's field note illustrates:

James volunteered to assist Keith in writing his biography. Keith was being silly and didn't know what he wanted to write about. He was very distracted by the activity around him. James was trying to make suggestions to Keith, but he would start and then say he really didn't know what he wanted to talk about. I suggested that he write about someone closer to home like his mother or brother or uncle.... He decided to write about his mother. James then started to help him write the 10 characteristics he needed to start his biography paragraph. When James and Keith finished the characteristics list, James asked me if I would help Keith write the paragraph so that he could go and work on his digital program.

According to James's DUSTY instructor, this was characteristic behavior, demonstrating both his willingness to assist when a tutor was struggling with a child and his consciousness of his responsibility toward his own work.

Surprisingly, however, when we visited James's school in order to interview his teacher, Mr. Ahmad, we were presented with quite a different picture of James, one that seemed out of keeping with the helpful, conscientious young man his DUSTY instructor and tutors had come to know. Mr. Ahmad recognized James's skills as a student: "He was top, top, top! Academically he was a top student ... one of the best in the classroom... and he took a lot of pride in that." Yet he described James as having "problems":

Well, you know, James had a problem of getting along with students, and he had a problem following my instructions, and sometimes when I would have to get on him about his behavior, he felt that I was pickin' on him. But I wasn't pickin' on him, I was just pointing out certain things that he should ha-, that he should do inside the classroom. So he had a serious problem following authority.

In fact, according to Mr. Ahmad, James's school persona resembled the "cool pose" (Majors & Billson, 1992) version of African-American masculinity. James excelled in sports and was a leader on the athletic field; he was physically and verbally confrontational, even aggressively defiant toward authority; and he adopted the latest fashion trends, despite stringent rules regarding uniforms at the Catholic school he attended.

An African American himself, Mr. Ahmad attributed James's objectionable actions to the negative influence of current Black cultural and linguistic constructs surrounding masculinity:

Well, if you want to think about African-American culture, the music, the language—for example, they would say, 'Don't be dissin' me, man.'.... To 'dis' somebody, those are fighting words, right? Language and the culture, uh-huh. Language like, 'Man don't let nobody punk you out,' that kind of language, right? It motivates a—how can I say it?—a sometimes unnatural manliness among the youngsters...Defend yourself if you have to. And no one wants to be disrespected, but sometimes, sometimes not understanding things like you should, you'll be confronted with a situation, and you might think it's manly to hit somebody over the head with a stick.

DUSTY staff members were shocked to hear Mr. Ahmad's characterizations of James, but not so

shocked as when, toward the end of March in his second DUSTY semester, James was expelled from school for shoving his physical education teacher. This news preceded the boy into DUSTY on the lips of his classmates. When James entered the DUSTY classroom, his instructor said she realized that "he was trying to act smooth," but it was obvious that he was disturbed. James missed the next few DUSTY sessions; his mother said it was due to embarrassment about the fight and being expelled. Thus, for a moment his school self, the bad boy with a "cool pose," threatened his DUSTY self, the junior tutor. After long conversations with both his instructor and his mother, James was convinced to finish the semester at DUSTY and to complete his digital movie, *Pits*.

James's movie was the story of two pit bulls, Blacky—"kind of a vicious dog"—and Carmel—"a girl dog." He introduced his narrative in fairytale fashion: "Once upon a time there was a dog named Carmel." The movie related the story of Carmel's pregnancy, a subsequent fight between Blacky and Carmel over one of the puppies, and the process by which James "got them to be better friends." According to our retrospective interview with James, the story was based on his experiences with his pet dogs. However, his story was not simply a straightforward report like his football movie. In *Pits* the protagonist, who is identified in the story as James himself, continually assumed adult responsibilities, exercised judgment, and acted with maturity. He took his dog, who had been injured in a dogfight, to a doctor—but not just any doctor. James noted in his narration, "He was a Black doctor," and took pains to find such an image. Later in the story, James took responsibility for making the two dogs become better friends. Thus, a pit bull owner was here portrayed as acting as a peacemaker and responsible pet owner, a stance that would resonate with the local community, where pit bull owners were regularly chastised in the media for not controlling their pets. At the very least, we can say that in *Pits* James aligned his protagonist with responsible adult actions and positive African-American role models.

Contrary to reports of his in-school behavior, at DUSTY James consistently conducted himself in a manner that mirrored his *Pits* self: a responsible, thoughtful, helpful young adult in the making. Perhaps James was indeed on a cusp, teetering between the archetypal "cool pose" at school and a version of the "good student" at DUSTY. The structure of DUSTY gave James ample opportunity to act on his urges to

lead and to help other students as a junior tutor. DUSTY also allowed James a place and a means to redefine himself. At school, his reputation and identity as a bully, an aggressive athlete, and a threat to classroom control undoubtedly accompanied him as he progressed through his elementary school years. DUSTY instructors, tutors, and children who attended different schools had no prior knowledge of James's character; they based their opinions on the positive interactions they had with him. For James, DUSTY offered a clean slate on which he could re-narrate himself, a space where he could explore and develop other aspects of his identity. In one DUSTY instructor's words,

...The object of DUSTY is to aid kids like James in tapping into and creatively expressing aspects of themselves, rather than forcing them to fit within a preexistent mold. Some kids need to act independently and to lead, and I don't think school does them, or society, any service by coercing them into the role of follower, at least exclusively. That is one thing that DUSTY is well positioned to counteract.

Thus, one of the most important functions an afterschool or summer program can serve is as an alternative site of identity construction, a space that provides a certain socio-historical freedom so children can, to an appreciable degree, write their educational biographies anew.

### Freedom to Choose

A second important function that an afterschool program can serve is to provide children with a measure of intellectual freedom. We have already illustrated how important it was for students like Taj to be able to compose, not only in words, but also in multiple modalities, and for students like Leon to have multimodal entry points for writing. For many students, the opportunity to draw on popular cultural genres—superhero stories, comic books, and television programs—as well as local and familial funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992) was certainly key. To have as an end goal the making of a movie, with its emphasis on the visual and its linkages to sound and popular music, was a part of subject-matter freedom as well.

A further affordance of such freedom was the relational and pedagogical support that allowed some students to address controversial social and personal topics, such as race, stereotyping, and homosexuality.

To illustrate this second important feature of DUSTY as an alternative learning space, we turn to Malcolm, who'd been held back in fifth grade—due to “immaturity,” his mother explained—but who showed himself to be a very thoughtful student at DUSTY. During the day, Malcolm attended a school that took social justice as its theme. At DUSTY, he found the means to explore related issues both in his digital story and in conversations with the adults around him.

Malcolm wasn't initially interested in making a digital story; like Taj and Leon, he also had a hard time writing by hand. He was a big fan of comics, in particular *The Boondocks*, a political satire that features an elementary-school-aged African-American boy, Huey, who is a serious revolutionary. Malcolm insisted that he himself was not a revolutionary, but he identified with Huey because they were both “sarcastic” and because Huey had “hair like me”—an Afro. Malcolm pasted frames from *The Boondocks* on his notebooks, and he came to be known at DUSTY as an expert on cartoons. His DUSTY instructor thought Malcolm

Perhaps James was indeed on a cusp, teetering between the archetypal “cool pose” at school and a version of the “good student” at DUSTY.

might be interested in creating a digital story somehow related to *The Boondocks*, but he strongly resisted this idea. In an effort to understand Malcolm's fascination with the comic, as well as his reluctance to use it in his digital composition, his instructor asked his advice about which volume of *The Boondocks* to purchase and then brought that copy to the afterschool program. According to her field notes, when Malcolm spied it, he sat down at his computer and announced to no one and everyone, “Today is going to be a great day! I got here early, I know just what I'm going to write, and there's a copy of *Boondocks* in here!”

As work on his story progressed, other conversations revealed the principal reason for Malcolm's initial reluctance to write about *The Boondocks*. As one tutor noted, “Malcolm was extremely cautious of being racist, because *The Boondocks* is ... a ‘Black’ comic.” Here are Malcolm's own words from an interview:

Oh yeah, it's a Black comic book, and if I was gonna write that, it's kinda being racist. I like



comic books like *Superman*, *Spiderman*, *Punisher*. They're all, well, white, and I like them. If I put out that this is a Black comic book, I think that's kind of being racist. Like you're going against, let's see, *Superman*. You just wanna read, like, *Powerman*, the strong guy, because he's African American. But really they are [all] superheroes and it's a comic book and some people still are racist. That's why I don't want to put out that it is a Black comic book.

Many such conversations about race, literacy, and representation—as well as homophobia and even existentialism—are recorded in our field notes on Malcolm. One day when Malcolm tried to insult a fellow student by calling him a “hippie tree climber,” the other student retaliated by calling Malcolm “gay,” which for these boys was to throw down the gauntlet in their rank-ordering of insults. Sexual orientation as

“Today is going to be a great day! I got here early,  
I know just what I'm going to write, and there's a  
copy of *Boondocks* in here!”

an identity category was quite salient for many of the boys, increasingly so as they drew closer to puberty. The displays of virulent heterosexuality often demanded of them on the streets and the playground created a measure of anxiety as they figured out what it meant to enact being straight or gay. Our field notes detail a complaint by another DUSTY student, an African-American boy, to the DUSTY director, who is also male and African American; the child complained that his white male DUSTY instructor was gay and had touched him inappropriately. Further conversation revealed that the young boy believed his instructor was gay because of his New York accent, a way of speaking he had never before encountered, coupled with the instructor's custom of resting his hand on the child's shoulder as he guided his work at the computer. In this case, as in the case with Malcolm, a serious conversation ensued about difference, the power of labels, attempts to offend, and quickness to take offense. “Malcolm listened very intuitively,” one tutor noted, adding that “it was a good day; the kids listened and understood.”

Malcolm's instructor believed that he “was a student who, once he believed you took him and his interests seriously, was willing to engage in serious conversations”; she vigorously disagreed with his school-based diagnosis of “immaturity.” DUSTY was more than a just social space where child authors could create digital stories, privileging diverse topics, genres, and media as they saw fit. It was not enough for students to be able to compose in many modalities; they also had to know that their ideas, beliefs, and interests would be taken seriously. Further, they needed, within this accepting environment, to have their views broadened and challenged. Many have written about the need for a critical literacy curriculum that, for example, challenges hegemonic gender practices (Young & Brozo, 2001). One way DUSTY enacted such a critical pedagogy around literacy and multimodal composition was in interactions with its unusually diverse group of tutors and staff. In such an environment, occasions to have far-ranging but respectful discussions about difference arose with regularity.

### Freedom to Move

We conclude this section by returning to Leon, the student who experienced, during his year-long tenure at DUSTY, the most dramatic transformation of all of the boys in the program, according to his instructor. Leon's case illustrates the third distinctive way that DUSTY was configured as a social space: its allowance for physical movement, and the autonomy that such freedom symbolized for many of the boys. The simple ability to move about and access different physical areas is not a trivial issue, perhaps especially for African-American boys, whose movement tends to be severely restricted and disciplined at school. Murtadha-Watts (2000) notes a widely held perception that young Black masculinities “must be tamed and trained in elementary schools,” where “a culture and implicit curriculum of physical restriction permeates” (p. 55).

For Leon, freedom of movement was crucial, for he simply could not sit still. Moreover, he was very demanding, commandeering daily the complete attention of his DUSTY instructor or tutors. At the same time, he seemed unable to focus on whatever task was at hand. Here is the way one DUSTY staff member recalled Leon:

After distractedly half-listening to some lesson-related explanation, followed by a very brief



moment of concentration on his part, Leon would loudly exclaim, “I need HEEEEEEELP!” Immediately thereupon, he would look away and cast aspersions on whichever other person (students and others) in his line of vision might be likely to take offense and respond in kind. He relished any opportunity to jump from his seat and roughly, playfully tangle—verbally and physically—with anyone who was game. After repeating this cycle several times, he would impatiently ask, “What time is it?” and then excitedly complain, “I need to finish my homework!” almost as if his teacher or tutor had in fact been a source of interruption and inefficacy.

Well behind the other students his age—as evidenced by his struggles with the homework he brought to DUSTY—Leon was unable to decode simple texts or tell time from an analog clock. Life at school and even at DUSTY was not easy for him. Big

The simple ability to move about and access different physical areas is not a trivial issue, perhaps especially for African-American boys, whose movement tends to be severely restricted and disciplined at school.

for his age and overweight, Leon often reacted with frustration and tears. Describing one such reaction, a tutor noted that Leon “laid down on the stairs and began bawling his eyes out.” Tutors’ field notes during his first semester at DUSTY were filled with worries about his intellectual and social progress:

Leon was way behind everyone else in the development of his story. He had a lot of great ideas, but he did not want to write or type. His story

was on professional wrestling and his favorite wrestler, Stone Cold Steve Austin. When we began he had about two sentences completed. He had no problem explaining wrestling, but every five minutes he asked if I could write for him or if he could get a snack.

However, toward the end of the second semester, field notes about Leon began to change, much to the surprise of his long-suffering helpers. “When I was working with Leon,” commented one tutor, “I noticed he was different than usual. Most of the time he always gets himself in trouble because he likes hitting on other people and shouting out loud if he needs something. . . . He was a different person from what I have seen in past weeks.” Leon had indeed, gradually

### Leon wanted to be a good boy, but he needed a participant structure that offered both freedom and constraint.

but noticeably, begun to sit still for longer periods, to be less combative with other children, and to take a genuine part in activities. When DUSTY children had the opportunity to write to children in India, Leon wanted to send them the list of rules that DUSTY children had jointly constructed, rules based around being prompt, polite, prepared, and respectful. Commented one tutor:

I will never forget the day Leon asked to sit and type up the rules of DUSTY to send to the kids in India. Everyone was upstairs doing homework, and I think Leon had escaped from one of his tutors. I was at the desk near the wall that the rules were taped up on when I heard him behind me at a computer. He asked if he could send the rules of DUSTY to the students in India. I said “yes,” and then he sat and typed by himself until the time was up. The next day he finished the list. It was the first time that Leon ever sat still to write something by himself and the first time he picked up a project exactly where he had left it off.

Leon was further able, as we described earlier, to take photographs and be interviewed for a digital story that he actually completed. This story, *How*

*DUSTY Changed My Life*, began with a photograph Leon had taken of the DUSTY backyard, and the line, read in Leon’s halting voice, “At DUSTY’s I have learned to write stories, learned about the rules, and been taught the computer stuff.” Later in the movie, with a photograph of leaves and a flower on the screen, Leon intoned: “I decided to do this story on DUSTY’s because I like it here a lot.” Next came this evaluation, accompanying a photograph of the stage in the DUSTY backyard: “It’s okay here because it has taught me to sit down and concentrate on working skills.” To accompany a picture of a picnic table, Leon read: “At DUSTY there are good tutors who are nice and funny. The tutors help me read and write better.” Toward the end of the movie, juxtaposed with photographs of upside-down stools and a board, Leon proclaimed, “DUSTY’s is between having fun and school.”

Leon’s transformation, like the development of any child, was a function of many things. The material fortunes of his mother and her boyfriend, who was a true father figure to Leon, improved over the year; DUSTY staff noticed that Leon began to come to the program in fresh clothes. Mid-year, Leon was assigned a university tutor with whom he got along especially well. This tutor was a young white man, tall and broad, a college athlete. The tutor made a movie about his work at DUSTY and featured Leon in it, a role Leon relished. From this tutor and others, Leon received a degree of personal attention that is often impossible in many school settings; this attention eventually had a positive effect on Leon’s academic progress. Freedom of movement, both literal and metaphorical, was pivotal as well. For Leon and other DUSTY students with similar temperaments and needs, a routine soon developed in which they left the building to go into the backyard, accompanied by a tutor, and then returned to be re-integrated into program activities. During the year, we saw Leon slowly develop a measure of control over his body and mind as he learned to sit and focus on the activity at hand. As one DUSTY instructor noted, Leon wanted to be a good boy, but he needed a participant structure that offered both freedom and constraint. It is no accident that Leon was fascinated by DUSTY’s rules, and that learning to follow those rules became for him an important sign of accomplishment. By participating in a liminal space that provided structure and freedom, work and play—that was between school and fun—Leon could begin to assume the posture and habits of the student he, his parents, and his DUSTY instructors wanted him to be.

## IDENTITY FORMATION IN AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAMMING

At a time when afterschool programs are under pressure to become extensions of the school day, we argue not for their isolated autonomy, but for recognition of and support for the special functions they can serve as alternative spaces for learning and identity formation, spaces that offer participant structures, literacies, relationships, and ideologies that are different from those offered in school. Such features are often unavailable during the school day for a variety of administrative, pedagogical, epistemological, and economic reasons. Especially during periods of intense standardization, back-to-basics, testing, and accountability—not to mention competition for resources—afterschool programs can be islands in the storm for children and families who are most in need. Such programs can provide culturally alert and critically attuned creative activities, relationships with caring adults, and pathways toward positive social futures and imagined selves. Although they have marginal power compared to institutions such as school, church, and government, afterschool programs have the advantage of working outside the usual institutional constraints and habits of mind. They bring together diverse talents and identities, a range of resources both social and material, and a commitment to and knowledge of local communities. Our analysis of children's participation in DUSTY suggests such rich possibilities.

Most research on afterschool programs is evaluative, seeking to provide funders and designers with evidence that programs have made a difference in learning outcomes. We recommend, and have used, a different approach: the study, not only of outcomes, but also of identity formation and of learning processes and practices. If afterschool programs can act as alternative learning spaces, then there is much to discover about how children grow and learn from their participation in these contexts—information that cannot be obtained elsewhere. In our research we focused on how boys' identity enactments were afforded both by characteristics of their afterschool social space and by the symbolic means and subject matters it privileged. We documented how successful all of these children were at digital multimodal composition, provided they were given appropriate social support and a range of entry points to the process rather than, for example, being required to



begin by writing. We discovered anew the importance of popular culture for these young authors—the appropriation of themes, images, and sounds from television and cartoons, music and movies—and, in particular, the ways the boys re-purposed this material in their own stories. To educators who worry that children, especially boys, are too immersed in mediatized worlds, we would point out that the boys' active use of such symbolic material in their stories often serves important, often invisible, ends, such as the reworking of their social world in agentive ways.

Our study illustrates the power of afterschool programs in fostering boys' identity formation. Recent scholarship on identity regularly champions the fluid nature of identity affiliations and calls for research that reveals multiple versions of masculinity, but there are not many answers to these calls—especially regarding young boys of color, and doubly when those boys are African-American residents of inner cities. There is, in fact, a dearth of positive images of such boys, and an over-abundance of negative ones, in the popular media, in academic scholarship, and especially in school contexts. This paper has presented portraits of young boys' enactments of self through digital media, self-representations showing that these boys are, and want to be, caring, conscientious, thoughtful, inventive, critical, and engaged. We have taken care not to romanticize these youth, several of whom struggled academically and socially both in and out of school, but we hope we have done justice to the growth, accomplishments, and potential they demonstrated in the afterschool program.



## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Glynda A. Hull** is Professor of Language & Literacy, Society & Culture in the Graduate School of Education at the University of California, Berkeley. Her research has examined digital technologies and new literacies; adult literacy and changing contexts and requirements for work; writing and students at-risk; and community/school/university partnerships. She is co-founder (with Michael James) of DUSTY, Digital Underground Storytelling for You(th), a community technology center that recently received the University/Community Partnership Award from the University of California, Berkeley. She has been recognized as a Distinguished Teacher at UC Berkeley.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>It should be noted, however, that the “boy problem” has long been with us. Tyack & Hansot (1990), in their history of coeducational schooling, note that worries about boys surfaced as part of educational reform movements early in the 20th century.

<sup>2</sup>Participants’ names are pseudonyms except in one case in which the child and parent preferred use of the child’s actual name.

<sup>3</sup>Following Gibson (1979) and Norman (1999), we use the term “affordance” to indicate a feature of a tool (or an object or an environment) that predisposes us to certain uses of it. For example, a sofa affords a place to sit or lie down. We have found it helpful to consider how different symbolic systems and tools seem to make possible the expression of particular kinds and forms of meaning. A chisel and a piece of stone typically afford short texts, while the invention of the printing press made possible the mass production and distribution of lengthy ones. Given the proliferation of digital media and the possibility of composing in combinations of modalities, we want to ask what kinds of textual forms and meanings these tools afford.

<sup>4</sup>DUSTY ([www.oaklanddusty.org](http://www.oaklanddusty.org)) was co-founded by Glynda Hull and Michael James. We gratefully acknowledge support for DUSTY development and research from the Robert F. Bowne Foundation, the U.S. Department of Education’s Community Technology Centers grants program, the 21st Century ASSETS grant program of the California State Department of Education, the Community Technology Foundation of California, the University of California’s UCLinks Program, and the City of Oakland’s Fund for Children and Youth. We also thank our university and community partners: the UC Berkeley Graduate School of Education, the Prescott Joseph Center for Community Enhancement, Allen Temple Baptist Church, Cole Middle School, Hoover Elementary School, the Castlemont Family of Small High Schools, and St. Martin de Porres Middle School, all located in Oakland, California.

<sup>5</sup>Murtadha-Watts (2000) notes that “Black masculinities are seen as determined and set at a very early stage” (p. 56). That is, while white males are viewed as redeemable after they have gotten into trouble, the same is not true for African-American males.

<sup>6</sup>Taj’s performance is reminiscent of research reported by Bennett (1991), who analyzed a young boy’s oral enactment of a wordless picture book.

<sup>7</sup>In this and subsequent transcriptions, we use the symbol == to indicate moments in which two utter-

ances follow each other without any perceptible pause, or even overlap each other as one person begins to speak before the other person has stopped. “Latching” and overlapping of conversational turns can indicate interlocutors’ comfort and familiarity with each other, but they can also suggest a person’s eagerness to take the floor or willingness to interrupt. In the case of Taj and Miss Nora, these features suggest not only the speakers’ ease with each other, but also Taj’s propensity to interject himself into conversations. For a detailed explanation of transcripts and their analysis and interpretation, see Duranti (1997).

<sup>8</sup>Hull & James (in press) provide a more detailed case study of Jamal.

<sup>9</sup>Wing (2004), on whose research we drew, provides a more detailed case study of Patrick.

<sup>10</sup>Roche-Smith (2004), on whose research we drew, provides a more detailed case study of Manuel.

## **PHOTO CREDITS**

The photos used in this article were taken of youth involved in afterschool programs located in the San Francisco Bay Area: DUSTY (Digital Underground Storytelling for Youth) and the Cole Middle School Music Program. They feature children writing, using computers, making music, collaborating with college students, and going on field trips. For reasons of confidentiality, none of the children who appear in these photos are featured in the article.

All photos except those on pages 3, 6, 16, and 37 by Nora Kenney. Photo on page 3 by Denise A. Winn; photos on pages 6, 16, and 37 by Stacy Marple.

## **Your Program in Pictures**

Does your youth development program have photos that you would like to contribute to the Robert Bowne Foundation's Occasional Papers? If so, please submit high-resolution photos of youth, staff, and community members in a range of activities during the out-of-school time. We will ask you to fill out a form indicating that you have permission from all participants who appear in the photos. Send to:

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